

The Etherist

By REDPHANTOM XENOSYENOUS

(This is the author's note you should read: If you're read Geek Force, and paid close attention, you're noted several mentions of two terrorist leaders: Virus's father Soviet Jesus, and Freak. This story is about the younger versions of the characters. Soviet Jesus is refereed to as Virus here, and he is in no way the Virus from Geek Force. This story is set so far in the past, in fact, the members of Geek Force aren't even born yet. Virus I becomes the villain Soviet Jesus later on and forms a cult. Freak becomes a leader of a terrorist movement and the number one most wanted criminal in the world. That knowledge makes this story more interesting.)

(This is the author's note you can skip, but might interest you if you are into Geek Force: I just wanted to note that this story contains easter eggs and shout outs to characters which appear in Geek Force later. I didn't make it excessive however, and also forced on character in, Captain Carcharian. Another character in this rant makes a major appearance who has been around as long as there has been a Geek Force, who becomes extremely important later on. This story also features some of my extensive world building. I have a wiki of notes, linking to one another like Wikipedia on my computer which is well over one hundred pages and counting. I've thought a lot about what makes superhuman's powers work, creating the history, thinking about all the different technologies, the characters, and considering the sociological impacts of having superhumans in the world. I've taken it way too far, creating a Geek Force Multiverse so I can create even more scenarios to explore. And also so the other members of Geek Force can do stories without messing up my continuity. I know, I should get a hobby which is more fun, and less destructive in my life. Really Geek Force is ruining my entire life.

I want to keep Geek Force proper fairly clean of all of this. No alternate universe stories, no being bogged down for world building. Geek Force is for the members of Geek Force, and telling their day to day stories. It will become more about the big picture and fighting evil, but at it's core, Geek Force is designed to be a light tale about it's five main characters. A serious tale told in a humorous way. So most of the world building will be reserved for written stories like this one. If you've ever wanted to know all about how powers work in the Geek Force Universe, this is the place. If you've ever wanted to know about the various warring factions. Minor characters? This is it. It will be within a narrative, hopefully entertaining, of course, but this is where it will be at. I just

figure there is more tolerance and room in a written narrative for world building.

I want to do many stories like this, but I'm having some trouble holding off because there are certain things we aren't supposed to know yet for Geek Force proper. The Uprisings stand as a vague, world shattering event from the past. Freak, Soviet Jesus, and other characters are supposed to be mysterious to us. All of their backstories will be unveiled over the course of the narrative of Geek Force. The events of the past are shown in Geek Force, just not as in depth as I could go into them here.

Lastly, to set the scene, this is an entirely different era from the one Geek Force lives in. Superheroes are sanctioned by the government and encouraged. They are loved by the general populace. There are five major syndicates which supply super villains for the superheroes to fight. They have their hands in everything and some superhumans treat them like legitimate nations. A syndicate called the Pantheon, which figures into this tale, is the most powerful syndicate and has been since the early fifties. They are however, at the pentacle of their power, and beginning to show signs of their impending fall. Which means of course, that no one sees it, and the Pantheon is overexerting itself more than it ever has in all it's history.

Conflicts are erupting all over the world between the syndicates. A proxy war between all five major ones will be fought in the currently ongoing war in Afghanistan which several syndicates already have their hands in. At the end of it, two syndicates, one being the Pantheon, will collapse suddenly and rapidly within a couple of years of each other. In the chaos which ensues, events come together to create the perfect conditions for the Uprisings. All of this is starting to come together during this story, but it's going unnoticed. Everyone is just enjoying themselves and going about their normal lives. Those are the conditions this story is set against. I hope you enjoy it. And now, here it is...)

Alone in his office he sat. His office adorned with expensive oak furniture and shiny metal filing cabinets. His office chair jet black and comfortable. The time was three, no, well past four in the morning. His office was perfectly square. Twelve feet by twelve feet precisely. The cool marble floor perfectly smooth and even. It felt like a prison cell, and he could almost feel the walls closing in on him. The massive window behind his desk was letting the darkness seep in through his blinds and infect him. His lamp, with it's overbearing yellow rays did little to ease the tension. He allowed himself to become lost in an infinitely complex acid rock riff spiraling into the deep abyss which was pumping from his old gramophone for just a moment. And then the faces of his freshly fallen comrades and the sense of hidden danger brought him back to reality.

The man had not slept in in a week, perhaps longer than that. Time had seemed alternate between crawling at a snail's pace and then jetting forth with lightning speed. The clock seemed to be committing high treason. Betraying the senses with it's fake measurement of time. The man stared at the clock. It was five in the morning, and the sun had not yet made it's daily rounds. The man's brown eyes looked dead, and beneath them were deep purplish circles. His eyes were bloodshot. The man stared at the clock once more. Now it was eleven. Only eleven. Time had jumped back six whole hours. The man was massive, over seven feet tall. He was muscular, bred, trained, and conditioned for a life of battle. He wore the suit of a business man which was wrinkled and messy. His tie hung loosely from his neck. His hair was unkempt. The man walked through a dense jungle, leading his men. The sun was beginning to set, and they feared a surprise attack. The man, the commander raised his weapon high and looked behind a tree, and then he awoke from his dream. Sleep nagged at the man, trying to pull him into the same abyss in which his music was falling. The man swayed back and forth, and in the air, he detected the stench of napalm.

The man knew he could not afford to sleep, so he reached into his drawer and retrieved a vibrant orange pill. It was such a brilliant shade of orange it looked as though it would explode out of his hand. That the medicine would burst into the air and fly rapidly out of reach. That the man would have to kneel on the floor and scavenge up the medicine like some sort of animal. His mind wandered with the intoxicating effects of sleep deprivation. The man swayed back and forth. Reaching into his desk, the man pulled out six more pills and placed them onto his hand with the others. He looked down at the pills once more and they seemed to dance. They seemed to hop about and emanate their intense beams of energy. The man smiled and swallowed the pills.

Almost immediately the man felt alert and alive. His superpowers began to surge into life. The man was forced to struggle just to keep them inside. He spoke mentally to his powers, explaining to them as he would to a child that they would be needed when danger came. Next came the intense anger. The desire to kill, to maim. Then the man was talking to himself. Taming a primal beast. Trying to keep it in it's cage. At least until the danger came. The office came to life. The colors became more saturated. More intense. Outside, the man noticed the sun had risen. The man moved to the window and peered out. The jungle beckoned to him like seductive temptress. The man was timid. His hands shook as he remembered that place as one of fear. But he heard the bugs singing their cheery morning song, and the wildlife moving about. The man swayed a little as he thought of the life in the jungle. He looked out at the farmers. And he regretted that he would be killing some of them. But why would he? The war was long

over.

Behind the man, the phone rang. The man shook and stepped away from the dark window into his dark, quiet office. There was another ring at the phone. The smell of napalm became more intense. It drew closer to the man. The phone rang once more. The man walked closer to the phone. He picked it up after another ring as he wondered who would call him in the middle of the night.

"Hello?" the man asked, his voice hoarse from the long week.

"Yes." a male voice came from the phone in a fake British accent, "Is this Jim's Pet Hospital?"

The man frowned and slumped into his chair, "No, you have the wrong number."

"Really?" the fake British tone replied.

The man grimaced, "Yes, why the fuck would a vet be open this late anyway?"

"Well, you see." the man's voice was playful, "I got this dog. And it keeps attacking me guests. You see. And I got to do something 'bout this dog. So it's an emergency. And I heard this Jim's a hard workin' bloke."

"Look." the man said, the drugs making him even more aggressive, "I told you I'm not a damn vet."

"You can't help me?" the man's voice called back from the telephone in mock offense, "I'm afraid me dog is gonna kill somebody if I don't do something."

The man grew tired of arguing about the dog and slammed his phone back onto its receiver. The smell of the napalm grew ever more pervasive as the man did so, and yet, he heard none being deployed. He could, however, hear the helicopters flying overhead. The man rocked back and forth before settling back into his chair. Then he looked up at the intense lights above him in the immaculate operating room. He saw the chemicals pouring into his body from their pneumatic test tubes and plastic wires. He felt the poison enter his veins and he began to struggle against it. He struggled violently. He fought for his life, for his very freedom. He had not remembered struggling. But he did remember, he did remember the doctor's stoic faces. Their stoic, cold, merciless, all knowing faces. And that did not change. Because they knew, they knew he would never break free of the restraints. They knew everything. All that had happened, and all that would happen. They did not mock him, they did not smile, they

only stared. With cold piercing eyes while their hands moved levers and pushed buttons. There was only silence. And then there was the omnipresent smell of napalm. There should not have been napalm. This place was so far from the fighting, the death. But it was there. It was always there. It followed him like a misty cloud of doom.

The man awoke from his short reverie with a start. Less than two minutes it had lasted, and yet it was long, slow, vivid. It was vivid. The dream had been vivid. It was as though the man was transported through time and space and brought back there. It was the most vivid dream he had ever experienced. If it was a dream. Dreams were never that vivid. No nightmare he had ever experienced had been so realistic. So vivid. The man considered taking more pills. After so much lost sleep, his eyes fought the pills tooth and claw for supremacy and came close to victory. The man fumbled around in his desk for more medicine but was stopped by the sound of other human beings shuffling about in a frenzy. They spoke rapidly in a foreign tongue. It was a foreign tongue, one which the man did not understand, but that he knew. The smell of the napalm grew and pulled in to surround the man. He began to shake. The foreign noises got louder and louder until they began shouting at one another. And then gunfire. There was the awful sound of gunshots and of death. Women and children screaming. Men crying for mercy. The man knew the pills did not make people hallucinate. The man knew this was fake, but then the explosions, rocking the entire building. The lights flickered. The stench of napalm rose up into the air and became more intense. The explosions continued. The napalm in the air was palpable. It got into the man's mouth. The bitter taste stung his tongue and he hunched down in submission to it's sheer will power. The man felt the urge to vomit, but he was paralyzed, gripped with terror.

The door to his office opened. The man looked up and saw one of his workers. A tall thin man with all the color drained from his face. The man in the office stood up and faced his underling. He steadied himself and tried to listen to the words his minion was frantically speaking. The noise came out as that foreign language drowned by the sound of gunfire, explosions, and ear piercing screams. After a long while, it became clear what the minion was saying, "...we're under attack. Sir! We're under attack." The man behind his desk had no idea why his minion was speaking so slowly. If they were being attacked, it demanded swift action. The boss made a note to reprimand his worker once this attack was dealt with. He stepped forward but was halted by the sight of his worker being tackled and viciously attacked by a big brown something. A wild beast. A tall gray man with shoulder length, sleek, jet black hair came in behind the beast. He had a wide arrogant smile on his face, he shrugged, and said, "I tried to tell you I was having a problem with my dog maiming people."

The gray man walked forward into the office as the boss walked

backwards. The gray man's yellow eyes were taunting the boss with each advancing step. There was a sadistic delight in his facial expression and the gray man reeked of napalm. It came forth from him and saturated the boss's mouth once again, causing his lip to quiver, and his body to shake. The boss's eyes conveyed the the feelings of that deeply frightened animal which was his soul. "How've you been? I'd bet all this excitement reminds you of the war, eh, Themia?" the gray man spoke as he advanced on the man. Themia stood trembling and staring at the gray man. This man, the object of his nightmares. The one who killed his friends and brought them to the jungle. The man who strung them up and displayed them to the townsfolk. Who took pictures of them. The man who flayed his friends, devoured them, and served them to his army of foreigners.

The gray man moved closer, "You know, I was going to join the army once. Yep, just like the good old days. Fighting in the trenches in the World War, taking on those Sons of Purity, the Fascists, Nazis...but then I got to thinking, well, people should know what war is. That's why I decided to fight here in good old America. You know, to raise awareness. Really, I'm doin' this for you, Themia." the gray man took a few more steps towards Themia, "I was doing it for you, but you see, I ran into this problem. Some of the veterans, well, they're worthless bastards. Like you, Themia. Like you. So, I thought, well, why not kill those fuckers? You know, so as not to tarnish the heroism of the good ones." Behind the gray man, outside the office, the beast ravaged several of Themia's henchmen who had come to protect him. The gray man turned to look at the beast and then back at Themia, "What did I tell you? That dog is out of control, isn't it?" the gray man shook his head, "What do you think, Themia? Should I just put it out of it's misery?" The gray man took out a gun and pointed it at Themia. Themia stared at the gun blankly, and the gray man fired.

The sound of the bullets forced the napalm out of Themia's mouth. He sprang into action. Dodging the gray man's bullet fire while simultaneously transforming his upper body into that of a bug. His upper torso grew significantly in size, his body became disproportionate. Themia let out an otherworldly shriek and advanced on the gray man. It swatted the gun from the gray man's hand, and the gray man shrugged, "I prefer knives anyway." The two became engaged in a dance of death. Themia brought massive blows to the gray man's body, but the gray man always came back. The arrogant smile had faded, and a fire had risen up in the gray man's eyes. The gray man landed blows of his own, slight, but with staying power and an accumulating effect. Within mere minutes, the behemoth that was Themia was the bloodiest of the two. The gray man looked for an opening and then tackled Themia out of the window. A shiny metal object fell out of the gray man's pocket as he went.

Five entire stories Themia fell before he hit the rock hard ground below with the weight of the gray man bearing down upon him. Never in a million years would Themia have imagined such a short skinny man would pack such kinetic force. The gray man got up and spoke a taunting remark quickly in a foreign tongue. Then he wasted no time retrieving from his pocket a jagged knife. The sunlight bore down on both Themia and the gray man as the latter raised his knife into the air. Themia could see the hatred in the gray man's slitted eyes as he brought down his blade. After several strikes, Themia began to feel the pain.

Enemy soldiers dragged the survivors of the onslaught to their camp. Themia was one of them. He was no longer their commander. He was a survivor. A timid, passive prisoner. He looked up and saw three of his men were gone already. The rest looked at him with desperate eyes, pleading for him to fix the situation. Themia held no remedy. So he bowed his head to the ground and prayed to God. Centuries passed, and the soldiers came to ask them questions. Themia told them nothing. They asked if he knew anything, he told them he knew nothing. They asked him what he knew, he said he knew nothing. They asked him for information, and he said he could provide them none. They took one of his men and held their knives to him. They asked Themia what he knew, and he screamed, he swore to them that he knew nothing. It was the truth. That did not stop the blades. The rat bastards simply shook their heads and drove their knives into his soldier's body. Themia could feel it like the knives were digging into his own skin. He could always feel it. Every time. But this time. This time it was worse. It was more painful. More vivid than before. And there was the heavy taste of napalm in his mouth.

One by one, his men paid for the price of his ignorance. Just like before. And just like before, he was powerless. All he could do was plead and cry. He lost control of his bowels, his bladder, his mind and soul. His only comfort was the knowledge that it would end. Just like before, it would end. It always ended. They would come for him. They would save him. Just like before he thought of all the men he killed, the old men, the women, the children, and just like before he wept. But this time there was the stench of napalm. And when he looked up, he saw the faces of his victims. And he knew it would never end. But somewhere, deep down, he knew they would save him. He knew it would end. Surely enough, they came for him. He did not look up at them, as always. He slumped to the ground and got into the fetal position. The commander talked to him as always. Tried to comfort him. And then offered to help him up. Themia took his hand, as always. But this time was different. Because when Themia looked into his commanders eyes, he looked straight into the eyes of Satan, commanding a horde of demons. At that very moment, Themia finally understood his suffering had not yet begun.

The gray man's rounded, cat-like yellow eyes looked down on the body of Themia as he gutted it from the inside out. Blood splattered onto his face, flying six feet up into the air to reach it's target. It made the gray man uncomfortable. Warm liquid on a warm night, but this was dirty business. The gray man looked into Themia's eyes and saw a blankness. Themia thrashed and flailed, pleaded and cried, excreted and soiled himself, but it was not the gray man's doing. Just as his torso had burst out into a bug, his inner demons had sprang out of him. The gray man calmed himself with the idea that it was not he who had slain Themia, but rather Themia's own nightmares. The gray man heard the faint noise of the beast landing gracefully behind him, and he knew that the job was done.

"Jesus, Virus, can you be as brutal as possible?" came the beast's light toned voiced from behind.

"You killed more men than I did." Virus replied as he stopped working on Themia's torso and cut off his head. Virus grabbed the head with his free hand and held it, then he turned to the beast and added, "I just pay more attention to detail. Besides, I'm a killer, not a doctor. And besides, I've never done anything that bad. I've never cannibalized anyone. You finished the job?" Freak nodded, and Virus said, "About time. Took you forever. I swear, you're going soft on me."

The beast looked indignant, which was amusing for Virus, "I'm not going soft on you. I'm just as committed to fighting the mobsters as you are."

Virus suppressed a laugh and then drove his hand into Themia's head like a sock puppet. He held it up to the beast and then mimed with the head, "Hey kids, don't do crime, or you'll end up like this asshole." Virus laughed at his own joke and then tossed the head to the ground.

The beast suppressed a laugh and then gave Virus a look of disapproval and disgust. "That's terrible. That's really fucked up. Why do you do shit like that?"

Virus shrugged, "Because if I didn't, I'd end up like Themia here." Virus paused, and then added, "Or, I would be a tight assed pussy like you, Freak."

Freak was a tall man himself, and skinny with some muscle, but he was a head shorter than Virus. He wore an outdated looking uniform. Boots, a belt, long pants, and sleeves. All of which looked faded. A blue sword hung from his belt. His face looked more human than beast. He looked like a happy, light hearted fellow. His hair stood up in spikes. His eyes were yellow, and were his only intense feature. His

eyes were like a demon's eyes. And they conveyed a certain ferocity that betrayed the rest Freak's physique. A ferocity which could be summoned and harnessed freely by this timid creature. Freak wore a hooded cape, the hood of which he pulled over his head. Virus laughed under his breath at this motion.

The two men walked across the lawn of the building to a crowd of fans, terrified onlookers, and reporters which had gathered. Virus hastened his pace and outstretched his arms at the sight while Freak lingered behind and put his hands in his pockets. Virus greeted his fans and skeptics with the same upbeat, light hearted demeanor he had employed during the slaughter of Themia. After a few minutes, Virus went over to Freak and brought him back to the crowd. Virus introduced Freak to the crowd as a puppy who had been following him around which he was trying to get rid of. Virus told the ladies that Freak was single and open for cuddling. Plus, as a bonus, he had not been fixed. After talking to the reporters about their dangerous mob project, the two men walked down an alley towards the hotel where they had been staying.

Freak avoided eye contact as he spoke to Virus, "You promoted me to all the girls in the crowd again."

"Yes." Virus replied in monotone.

"You've done that every place we've been." Freak continued.

Virus nodded, "Well, you haven't had a woman any place we've been. And that makes it sad for me to think of what you do in the bathroom."

"I don't do anything in the bathroom." Freak replied.

"Except read entire novels, apparently." Virus retorted, "Oh, and you probably think about how you should eat less fiber."

Freak rolled his eyes, "My entire body is covered in fur. Grooming myself takes effort. I have to trim my fur to get it uniform."

"I'll bet you do spend a lot of time grooming yourself." Virus said sarcastically, "I'll bet you could even lick your own balls if you wanted to." Virus looked at Freak, who had a look of embarrassment, "Ever tried it?"

"No." Freak was Freak's prompt reply. The two men walked on in silence before Freak asked again, "Virus, why do you keep trying to hook me up with girls?"

"Why were you trying to commit suicide?" asked Virus as the two men

continued to walk. Freak was startled by this question and began to speak, but Virus turned to him and cut him off, "When I first met you, you were trying to kill yourself. Why?" Freak tried again to speak, but Virus beat him to the punch, "No, you weren't setting up a noose, you didn't have a gun in your mouth, but you attacked those mobsters that night because you wanted them to kill you. I saw you. I saved your ass. I've fought alongside you since then, many times. You weren't giving them everything you had. Hell, we went and killed all of those motherfuckers and their boss afterwards. Piece of cake. You wanted to die that night. Why?" Virus stared into Freak's eyes for a moment before he continued to walk. Freak followed.

Virus continued, "You know, hell is full of lonely people, Freak. Lonely people do all sorts of stupid desperate shit. They fill the pages of their lives with the black stain of sins. It's not that people with families, mates, and friends are less evil. On the contrary, they might be worse than any of us. But they're too busy making life hell for the people they love to do it to anyone else. Up to a point, we get a pass for sinning against the people we care for. And of course, when you've got someone, they give you too much bullshit for you to do anything other than work your ass off and put up with their crap."

The two men walked further towards their destination without speaking before Freak said, "I'm not lonely."

"Have you told Arista your house has a shrine for her?" Virus asked.

"I do not have a shrine to Arista." said Freak defensively.

Virus shrugged, "You might if you had a home." Virus laughed quietly and shook his head, "You know what the saddest thing about you is? You're brilliant. To know all the magic you know. It's nothing short of brilliant. Occasionally, you even scare me. You possess all that talent of yours, but you're too stupid to realize that she'll never give a fuck about you. It will never happen. You're just a subject to her. A specimen to study. Nothing more. If she could, she'd put you into a glass box so she could study you without even having to touch you." the air seemed to cool around Freak and Virus as Virus continued, "You're a monster, Freak. You and I are both monsters. No one loves you. You don't have any friends. And that's because you're a monster. Just leave Arista behind. Find a monster woman, make monster babies...or not."

The two men continued to walk and there was a pause before Virus added, "I will support you if you want to beat up Frank Rowley, though. That guy's an insecure asshole." Freak laughed at this, Virus paused, and then continued, "He's intimidated by you, you know. Not because he thinks you'll steal Ms. Zullo. He's got you beat there.

But because you did what he couldn't. We beat all the super villains in that town. You can learn in five minutes what he took years to master. That's why he was such a condescending prick to us. He thinks that government ID gives him some kind of authority. The government couldn't tell it's own ass from a gopher hole. He's just there because his daddy bought him his way out of the draft, but he asked him to give him a job where he could still flash a weapon and boss people around. That guy's a fucking asshole and someone needs to stomp him down."

Virus and Freak continued to walk until they reached a street with businesses and a few hotels, one of which was theirs. Freak looked at Virus and asked, "Do you have friends, Virus?"

Virus laughed, "If I had friends, do you think I'd be traveling cross country with you taking out mob bosses?"

Freak frowned, "We're taking out mob bosses for the greater public good..."

Virus looked Freak straight in the eyes, "You can lie to others all you want, but you should never lie to yourself, Freak." The two men shared an awkward silence before Virus asked, "Going back to the hotel?"

"Yeah." Freak replied, "Yeah, I'd like to get some rest before we finish these guys off. Maybe try and go over our evidence."

"I'm going to get a drink." Virus said, "I don't suppose you want to come?"

Freak shook his head, "No. That's not really my thing."

Virus snorted, "Doesn't like beer, doesn't like women, doesn't like attention, doesn't like partying, you're no fun at all. The worst partner any decent superhero could ask for." Freak said nothing and Virus spoke only to break the silence, "Well, enjoy your pansy poetry reading. If you like studying so much, maybe you should become a doctor instead of a superhero." Then Virus put his hands in his pockets, turned around, and walked towards the bar.

Freak stood still, and said with contempt, "Don't wake me up this time when you come in." Then Freak walked the other direction.

Virus frowned and looked to the ground as he walked off towards the bar.

Octavian sat alone at his desk. He was an imposing old man, who was still physically fit well past his prime. He wore a business suit and

black hat. He made a point to look sharp. Underneath his hat, Octavian was bald. His blue eyes were calm, worn with black circles underneath them. He was in his office, which was about three times more spacious than Themia's office had been, and ten times as luxurious. Light from the street lamps poured in through the window to Octavian's side. He sat as the dignified leader of Sacred Oasis, a thriving superhuman community, one of the largest in the country. He calmly marked his paperwork with a gold metallic pen, having been up for days to work for his city. Hornets were contained in a plastic nest on the other side of Octavian from the one with the window.

To Octavian's front, above the door to his office, hung a sign which read, "extendit Moses virgam super terram Aegypti et Dominus induxit ventum urentem tota illa die ac nocte et mane facto ventus urens levavit lucustas quae ascenderunt super universam terram Aegypti et sederunt in cunctis finibus Aegyptiorum innumerabiles quales ante illud tempus non fuerant nec postea futurae sunt operueruntque universam superficiem terrae vastantes omnia devorata est igitur herba terrae et quicquid pomorum in arboribus fuit quae grando dimiserat nihilque omnino virens relictum est in lignis et in herbis terrae in cuncta Aegypto."

At this hour, Octavian was fulfilling his duties as a businessman. He was going through a binder with lists and photographs of merchandise, marking out the ones that were damaged and to be discarded. There were many reasons why merchandise would not meet Octavian's standards. A physical handicap, age, either way, too young or too old to work. A mental defect. Too skinny to work, not attractive enough to whore out for sex. A blemish here or there, an ugly mole. It did not matter, Octavian marked them all for death without a second thought. That was business. Human trade. It was an underground trade but there was a great deal of money in it. Most of his clients were overseas. Lonely businessmen who yearned for a wife. Small time despots in need of extra hands, for guns or for hammers, for laying bricks, or for plowing fields. It mattered not to Octavian, just as long as the money was paid. This was a project he carried out all his own. It was not a project he was assigned by corporate. It was not endorsed by them, nor was it frowned upon. They taxed it, but that was business. And that was all it was.

Octavian's work was interrupted suddenly by a gang of eleven men with assault weapons bursting into his office. One of them had a flamethrower, which he used to torch the wasps setting next to Octavian. Octavian finished the page he was working on, slowly put down his pen, closed his binder, and looked up at the leader of the gang. He asked, "Can I help you gentlemen?"

"Those monsters killed Anathema." said the leader with anger.

"Did they?" asked Octavian, "Well, may the good lord absolve him of his sins and ease his guilt. Meanwhile, I promise you what you are about to endure is much worse than anything he encountered in Vietnam."

The leader of the gang looked at Octavian with scorn, "You did this. You got Anathema killed. You got them all killed. Those two punks rolled into town and you haven't done a thing. You let them roam free. You let them ruin all we've built. You ran our operation into the ground. We don't even control the superheroes anymore. Every two bit street gang punk wannabe is pushing us around. I think it's time for some new blood."

Octavian calmly removed his hat from his head and placed it onto his desk. Then he spoke, "I built this empire with my own two hands, grit, willpower, blood, and sweat. I secured support from corporate. I would never do anything to place my empire or my community in danger."

"We've destroyed your wasps, you're defenseless." said the leader of the gang, "We've got you cornered. You're right where we want you. Give it up, you've got no other options."

Octavian sighed and shook his head with disappointment, "I believe you will find if you make your move, I am more than prepared to deal with you. Now, I suggest you leave my office in peace, and we can all forget about this. I'll even throw you boys a party after we've strung these two thugs up in a tree."

"Get up old man, it's time to meet your maker." came the leader's harsh response.

Octavian shook his head and stood up. Octavian then kicked off both of his shoes and removed his socks. Then he slowly took off his coat and carefully placed it on the back of his chair. Next, Octavian undid his tie. Then he unbuttoned his shirt and placed it on his desk with care. His pants came off next, and then his boxers. Soon enough, he stood behind his desk in front of the gang stark naked. Octavian then closed his eyes.

"What kind of shit are you pulling?" asked the leader.

"Just getting comfortable." replied Octavian.

The leader fidgeted about trying to figure out what to do next, and then asked, "Are you giving up?"

"No." replied Octavian.

The leader advanced on Octavian a few steps, "Don't make us..."

Octavian spoke, cutting the leader off, "I'll never surrender. I'll never hand my great empire over to a punk ass motherfucker like you. If you want to take it from me, you'll have to kill me."

The leader scoffed, "Look here, we're not fucking around here. We're going to blow your god damn..."

"Then do it." Octavian said, cutting the leader off.

The bullets came at Octavian from all directions, but whenever they came within an inch of the desk, they stopped midair and hit the ground. The members of the gang may not have noticed save for the flashes of yellow light the force field made as it stopped the bullets and the sound of lead against the wooden floor. Octavian opened his eyes and smiled, "Sometimes in the past, that force field hasn't worked. Luckily, I had Armaturian to take care of the problem and shuttle me out to a hospital. As you all know, he couldn't do that now if he wanted to, so I am fortunate that it worked." Octavian stepped forward and pressed a button on his desk. A metal plate slid over the door, the window, and the air vents. Various noises were made signifying that the room was locking itself up and was completely air tight.

Octavian took a deep breath, "Now, you boys mentioned that you killed my precious bugs. I assume so that I couldn't use them against you. You're right. You killed my main weapon. Very good, very good." Octavian pulled out from underneath his desk a hazmat suit and began to put it on, "Yes, very good indeed, but, right now, I'd like to show you a better way to stop a plague. Just for future reference." Octavian chuckled as the eleven gangsters struggled to break free of the room, and then he pulled his gas mask over his face. Octavian tightened it down as he pressed the button to unleash the toxic gas. Then he pressed the button to remove the force field so he could fully enjoy the gangsters writhing and struggling to survive. They died in under two minutes. Octavian pulled two things out of his desk: a tommy gun, and a large six inch wasp stinger. Octavian pocketed the latter and held the tommy gun in his hands. Octavian searched the wall near the door for the hidden compartment. He found it and it opened, revealing a button. Octavian pressed it and the door to his office opened itself.

Octavian ran out into the hallway and shot down all the gangsters waiting for him. As he expected, they were all armed and part of the mutiny. And, as he expected, his reaction and survival was unexpected. Octavian encountered some resistance but for the most part he merely slaughtered the unsuspected gangsters. After he ran out of bullets, for those still standing, Octavian had the gift of

the stinger. Just mere seconds after being stung, a victim's skin would begin to turn blue and rot away as they struggled fruitlessly against inevitable death. Once Octavian had killed the gangsters standing, he turned to those he had merely wounded and finished them with his weapon. Octavian left none of the traitors alive. A fact that Octavian took great pride in. Octavian stood for a solid ten minutes admiring his handiwork before discovering another person was in his domain.

The man spoke, "Always nice to see a good slaughter, Octavian." A skinny man clad in white robes stepped out of the darkness. Octavian recognized the man immediately. He was the messenger for the Pantheon, the greater syndicate which Octavian's gang, the Hexapods, was subordinate to. The man's role as messenger was evidenced by his namesake, Hermes.

Octavian eased up and said, "Hermes. If I had known corporate was sending a representative I might have prepared a meal for you, and I would have met with you in..."

"Save it, Jason." Hermes said sternly, "We're not here to have a chat. I'm here because you've made a fucking laughing stock out of the Pantheon, and you've ruined our city."

"This is my city." Octavian corrected.

"Only because we let you have it." Hermes shot back at Octavian.

Octavian stood firm, "I built this city. Do you remember how it was after the World War? I cleared out the super villains. I made order."

"Only with our support." Hermes replied, "Without which you would not have gotten very far."

Octavian shook his head, "I would have crushed them all the same. Maybe it would have taken longer. I'll grant you that. But, I would have won it. I was helping you, remember?"

Hermes shrugged, "We let you think that. The truth of the matter is, we could have found anyone to clear out the super villains. Anyone with a gun and some mechs can get rid of super villains, Octavian. That's nothing special. I'll be blunt, the Pantheon is considering backing another gang in light of your lackluster performance as of late."

Octavian shook his head, "You can't do that to me."

"I'm afraid that we can." replied Hermes, "I'm afraid for you that it is more than in our power to remove you."

Octavian stood in defiance, "I built this city. I built it with my own two hands. This is my empire. You can't take that from me."

Hermes nodded, "Yeah, you cleared out the super villains. You cleaned up the city. You made us a bunch of money. You made the bosses real happy. You ain't doing that anymore. You've let two little thugs come in and fuck up our entire operation here. You've cost us millions of dollars. That's money we won't get back, Jason. Yeah, you had a good run. You built an empire. It lasted almost forty years. Well, you know what? All empires must fall, and that's a fact. You're an old man. You've lost your touch. It ain't fun no more. Let one empire crumble so a new one can emerge from the ashes of yours."

Octavian shook his head and breathed heavily, "If you do this, I will make you regret it. I will be your mortal enemy as long as I'm on this Earth. I will bring the..."

"Yeah, yeah." Hermes said, "You're the eighth plague. You control insects. You know what that really means to us? You don't have enough telekinetic power to control other living creatures. That's all. We all think you're a joke. We laugh at you when you're not paying attention. Just because you're just useful enough we don't want to offend you. You're a laughing stock. A small man who has delusions of grandeur." Octavian frowned and Hermes moved in closer to him, "You got one chance to redeem yourself. Zeus wants those two stopped, and he wants them taken alive. He wants them brought to the higher ups so we can kill them ourselves. Do this, and we will restore your honor. We might even apologize. We will have been proven wrong about you." After saying this, Hermes left, leaving Octavian to be comforted by the silence alone.

Octavian took a moment to ponder Anathema's death. Octavian was overjoyed that it had occurred. Anathema had never been anything but trouble. Somehow he had managed to convince Octavian that he would make a good leader in the gang. Someone must have lied for him, covered for him. Betularia perhaps? Betularia was like Anathema, he was relatively new as far as the leaders went, while Octavian and the other two leader were founders. But Anathema, dying was such a poor way to thank Octavian for saving his life. When Octavian met Anathema, he was in Vietnam. A broken man. He was captured by the Vietnamese and tortured. Walked his men right into a trap, got them all killed. But Octavian saw potential in Anathema. So, he convinced the Pantheon that Anathema was needed in Sacred Oasis. In Vietnam, it was partly a battle between the huge corporate syndicates, the Pantheon being the biggest and most powerful. Any superhuman fighting in that war was basically a henchman for the Pantheon. Even if they were fighting for the superheroes. That was how it was in America at least. It was a simple thing for the Pantheon to transfer Anathema.

Once Anathema got back to America, Octavian had paid for his medical treatment. Octavian footed the bill for Anathema to get psychological help. Four times. Octavian paid all that money to fix Anathema and he repaid his debt by going crazy when Octavian needed him the most. The one time a seasoned soldier would help the Hexapods. Octavian was angry over his lost money. Octavian should have known that Anathema was going to betray him. After all, Anathema was not even a true superhuman. He was a mutant. He only got his powers because he was poor and the army promised him extra money if he let them experiment on him. Octavian wished that Anathema had been the first to fall, and then he thought back to how the entire situation began.

It was two weeks prior that Virus and Freak had rolled into town. There was some warning that they were coming. The duo had taken out the local mob in Flaxen Terrace and then in Cherub Hamlet first. Both of those mobs were Pantheon sponsored. Hell, there was not a mob in a major city that did not get the Pantheon's blessing in America, or on the whole continent. And that was what was so disturbing about two punk ass kids running around and destroying all of that. There was no honor in what Virus and Freak were doing. They were running around offing mobs with no regard whatsoever for the rules. It was not right. Criminals should have a sense of honor and dignity. The fighting between the superheroes and super villains was mostly a ruse anyway.

The first leader Virus and Freak took on in Sacred Oasis was Bhamoensis. He was just a kid. Well, no, Bhamoensis was well into his fifties, but Octavian always thought of Bhamoensis as a kid. Octavian had taken him in during the early years of the gang. Bhamoensis had been a brutal little fuck, which was Octavian's attraction to him. Bhamoensis had spider powers. The ability to shot webs, the poison to keep a victim alive inside that web, and a taste for human flesh. He had nothing beyond that. Still, these skills made Bhamoensis excellent for getting information out of people, and keeping little bastards like Virus and Freak in line. The duo was wise to take Bhamoensis out first. It almost cost them their lives, Bhamoensis put up a fight. He almost became the hero of the Pantheon, vanquisher of the monsters, but Virus and Freak killed him. It was a devastating psychological blow to the Hexapods. Devastating. The most ruthless leader and his most ruthless men were taken out by some punks. Fear spread throughout the Hexapods.

There were various other attacks after that, but the next major blow came five days later. When Virus and Freak killed Betularia. Betularia was a hominid moth. He was short on powers, but what he lacked in fighting skill, he had in administrative talent. Betularia was the Hexapods' chosen intermediary between the gang and the government sanctioned superheroes. Between the gang and the city,

between the gang and the cops. Virus and Freak just happened to attack and kill Betularia during a meeting he was conducting with superheroes. Of course, the battle attracted press, and the press recorded proof of the city's corruption. Another wise move. Within days, AFTMOS had made arrests of the corrupt superheroes, the FBI was cracking down on the police force and the city government. That was what set the rebellion of the small street gangs into full motion. With that vital system removed, the gangs could no longer respect the Hexapods' authority. Armaturian, Octavian's second in command was quick to send out mobsters to put down the gangsters. It was after Betularia died that Anathema started to really break down. He began whining incessantly about all the innocents he had killed. Sacred Oasis had plunged into chaos.

Virus and Freak allowed the Hexapods to tear apart for the next five days. They made minor attacks, mostly on stores of drugs and money. Pantheon business. They hardly touched the human trade. They let AFTMOS tend to that. Then, after five days, they came for Armaturian. Again, Armaturian put up a fierce fight. Stubborn old bastard took five hours to die. In the end, however, he died all the same. Just like everyone else. Bloodied and on his knees. Death grants dignity to no man. Without Armaturian, Octavian was left to run the Hexapods on his own, and things got worse.

Now, three days later, Virus and Freak had finally come for Anathema as well. Octavian was the last man standing. It was not the first time in his life he had been in such a position. He had survived the previous times, because that is what Octavian was, a survivor. He would survive this as he had survived all the other punks who had come to knock down his empire. And he would make the Pantheon beg for his forgiveness. One of Octavian's henchman entered the room, repulsed by the slaughter Octavian had created. Still, the henchman straightened himself up and saluted Octavian. "Sir." the henchman said.

"Yes?" Octavian replied, relived to be shown the respect he deserved.

"One of the thugs dropped this at the site of the attack on Anathema." said the henchmen as he held up a metallic necklace.

Octavian examined the object, "What is it?"

"A dog tag, sir." the henchman handed the dog tag to Octavian.

Octavian examined the object more closely. There was a single metal plate around a necklace. A vintage dog tag, one of the sort no longer manufactured, no longer in use. Only a soldier from the World War could have worn it. On the tag, there was a strange name engraved in the metal. The tag read, "The Etherist." Octavian looked at the dog

tag as if looking at it through a child's eyes, and a large grin crept across his face.

The bar was loud and bright. Virus sat alone at a table skimming over the crowd. There were a bunch of loud, obnoxious rednecks. Virus smiled. It was exactly what he was looking for. Virus took a sip of the bottle lying in front of him. It was difficult underneath his cloak. Virus now wore the garb of a bigot. He had caused a commotion upon entering, but the barkeep of this pub had been foolish enough to let him in. It took six tries to find the right place, but Virus knew from experience that if you go from door to door, you can eventually find someone who will grant you asylum. Virus had not started a fight upon arrival, only because the patrons were not yet ripe. Virus needed to allow the alcohol to do it's work before making his move. It was presently getting late, and the bar was about to close. Virus knew the time for action was close at hand.

Virus surveyed the bar for a means to incite violence. He noted the foul mouthed rednecks, the ones who had spouted no less than five hundred racial slurs against superhumans since Virus had entered the bar. The ones who thought they were so god damn smart. Those ones were the worst. They would be his prime targets. Virus noted the quiet men and women. Those were the patrons he would leave alone. Or, at least, he would do his best to leave them alone. Virus scanned and saw several other bigots he wished would join the brawl. Maybe they had come looking for a fight, like he had. Virus's eyes moved to some superheroes next. Virus could tell they were the self righteous types, the ones who would join in on a fight to save the poor defenseless humans. Virus considered that he should try not to rough them up too severely, and then he decided a good ass kicking would do the heroes some good. Government sanctioned superheroes had an ego which needed to be smashed. All the government trained them to do was get their asses handed to them anyway. Besides, Virus had made life much better for these superheroes recently. So, he had earned the right to give them a little hell. He made a silent pact with himself that he would try not to break anything. But, he would not beat himself if he did, because, after all, he was no doctor.

Having taken in the air of the place, and having decided the air was palpable and ripe for an explosion, Virus scanned the bar for a spark to ignite the flames. He looked for something offensive, something close to the bigots he had been quietly stalking the entire night. And what he found was a lonely woman sitting at a bar stool. This was perfect. Virus would prey upon the humans' fears that the superhumans were taking all the good pussy, and infecting their pure bloodlines with primitive monkey seed. Eugenics and survival of the fittest. It made Virus laugh when bigots tried to use science terms and ideas. All those bigots, they were more hostile to scientists than any other group of people. They were even more hostile to them than they were

to minorities. All they did was throw around science words to give themselves legitimacy. Much like how the bigots treated their own religion. It sickened Virus. The abuse of language and facts in order to look smart and steal legitimacy. Then again, Virus thought to himself, "What else are words and knowledge for except an excuse to make others listen?"

Virus moved over to the poor woman and sat next to her. "Hey bitch." Virus said to her casually, "What's up? You a superhuman?" The woman looked scared, and inside Virus was smiling. He knew she was not superhuman, he knew everything which was about to transpire before it did. He could feel the air thicken in the bar. He could feel all the eyes focused on him. He knew the bouncers were getting out their AFTMOS sticks. Virus continued his act, "I ain't no doctor or nothing, but I guess you ain't superhuman, is you?" Virus groped her, and he could feel the fear of the honest patrons as the tension in the bar rose, "That's ok, I like bestiality. Just as long as you don't talk none."

A bouncer was in Virus's face brandishing an AFTMOS stick before Virus knew it. Virus saw a fear deep in the man's eyes. "I think it's about time you left." the bouncer yelled at Virus. It was not bark which impressed Virus, it was the bite. Virus disabled the AFTMOS stick with a few swift movements of his hand. The bouncer adopted a look of sheer terror without his safety net, his precious weapon. The thing to make up for his lack of strength. It was only Virus who witnessed this transformation in the man's features, however, because in microseconds he had tossed the man across the bar into a table like the baby Virus had diminished him into. Six other bouncers rushed over to Virus to avenge their fallen comrade. This time, Virus did not disarm their AFTMOS sticks. No, they were just sticks if he avoided contact with the magically charged tip. Virus dodged all six sticks with grace and style. A kick. Two punches. A open palm to the chest. A Heiseiki blast of wind. Several rapid kicks, punches, and chops to finish the last man. The six bouncers were done, on the ground, and out for the count. Virus stood calmly over their limp bodies like a Hindu avatar. Like a sentient being towering above the mere mortals. Virus had even let one of the sticks hit him once with all it's magical force. Just to show he could not be conquered. Virus discretely looked at the men's bodies. They were all breathing. It was good.

Many patrons had left the bar once they were able to fully comprehend what Virus had done. Only the bigots and the brave remained. The crooks and the heroes. Virus had such a hard time telling them apart. It was the superheroes, eight of them total, who got up to confront Virus first. Of course it would be superheroes, as the bigots, still in the bar, were all secretly cowards. One of the superheroes stepped forward. He had blonde hair, blue eyes, and an athletes body. Likely

the quarterback who switched to superheroing because his grades were too poor for college. Virus could tell intelligence the leader lacked, because his men were undisciplined. He had not thought to surround Virus, an obviously superior foe who could not be bested by force alone. Virus figured the leader for a naive man. He looked calm and compassionate. Virus guessed the leader was going to try and reason with him. That would be a grave mistake. A good leader would know Virus was a man who could not be reasoned with or beaten easily.

Sure enough, the leader said, "Hey man. I know you are mad about President Reagan's executive order recently, but, come on, they were breaking the law. They had to do something. Times have changed. Superhumans have rights now. I mean, I know it's not exactly equal, but you know, this won't do any good. You know, man? You know what I'm saying? Let's just walk out of the bar and settle down somewhere, ok? I'll even drive you home." The leader talked down to Virus as someone speaks to a child.

Virus unleashed a wave of Jigokuki just as the leader extended his hand to him and tried to pat his back. Fire fabled to be from hell itself swept up the eight superheroes in a mighty wave. Virus smirked. He would have been willing to bet those losers had no idea of even what they had been hit with. He had used an Oniki attack. The demon chi. It was very advanced magic. Being that these men were in their early to mid twenties, they likely had not even used the most basic of Oniki techniques yet. Of course, Virus himself was in his early to mid twenties. Virus smiled as the superheroes got up. He had to give them some credit, they all knew how to respond without speaking to each other, even if their response was completely half assed. Virus knew from the slight scent of rain that the superheroes were about to use a Mizuki attack, which was Namaki of the water element. Namaki is the lower chi element, the first one for a superhero to learn beyond the magical elements working his powers. The superheroes had assumed, incorrectly, that Virus had used a Kajiki attack against them, Namaki of the fire element. And they had assumed that fire was his prime element, so water would work best against him. That had docked them points in two categories. Firstly, Mizuki attacks only make Jigokuki attacks more powerful, even though it was the fire element of Oniki. Secondly, water was actually Virus's prime chi element. The one he could command most easily. This would be a walk in the park. Even more so than it usually would have been.

Virus easily deflected the water away from his body, taking great care not to use it to attack the superheroes. Then he swam through the air using Juuryokuki and up to one of the superheroes. A black man. If he was to play bigot, he may as well take the illusion to the extreme. Seven body movements Virus made, none the superhero made, save for falling to the ground. Virus kicked the superhero standing

nearest to him after that, and was met with a burst of plasma. Virus launched a few punches to keep the superhero occupied and then decided to try a much more simple tactic. A Kooriki move. Open palm to the upper chest and his victim turned to ice. The superhero did not shatter, nor did Virus make any effort to shatter him, nor would it even make sense for him to shatter, but Virus was sure the man would need a good doctor. The six superheroes descended on Virus. Reverting to a primal state, the superheroes attacked only with their fists. Virus blocked incoming blows with his arms and feet, four at a time as they poured in. Virus dodged the rest of the blows. He moved through the air as if it was perfectly natural for his body to contort and twist in such ways. Twisting and turning. Not a single strike landed on his body. Virus was in complete control. Soon, he tired of the game, and he decided to give the superheroes a much deserved rest.

One kick. Five punches in a circular motion. A charge of Inuzamaki to send the now electrically charged superheroes flying back. A mighty flash of Hoshiki befitting of the Tengokuki it was the fire element of. Virus moved like a divine being with divine fury. Many more punches, many more kicks. Too many to count. Virus was fighting his brethren now, men who would not fall quite so easily. Virus was almost proud of them for lasting so long. Twisting and turning Virus's body went, delivering strike after strike. At long last, his body took blows itself. Sanseiki, Kusattaki, Kabiki, acid, rotting, fungus, Oniki elements which caught the superheroes off guard. Back they went, but not for long. More kicks and punches Virus threw. Sweat poured down his face. Virus unleashed a heat ray, Netsuki, the fire element of the Shibooki to slow his opponents down. Jishinki and Denshiki blast combo, seismic and electronic waves, again of Shibooki to slow his foes down. It worked. Virus landed more punches and a few dropped. Meanwhile, Virus moved as fast as ever, perhaps even faster, having warmed up. Ishiki, rocks flew at his enemies. A blast of Koosuiki, which brought forth torrential rain, and his targets were done. Virus paused and merely breathed. No longer did he look godlike. Now, he looked like a mortal. A powerful mortal. A blessed mortal, but a mortal all the same. Virus hoped his battle buddies were able to find a decent doctor. He grinned ear to ear.

The rednecks, five in all, advanced on Virus with their guns drawn. Yes, indeed, they were cowards. Never acting without the silent protection of their sacred god. The redneck Virus scorned the most was in the middle. The self appointed leader of the crew. The sight of him made a searing heat rise up in Virus's chest. The rednecks surrounded him. They got props the superheroes did not, they at least attempted a strategy. The rednecks' real sin was being too foolish to pull it off. Retreat might be better in this circumstance. Then again, if these were men to understand the value of retreat, Virus would not be needing to thrash them in the first place. The rednecks

also knew that Virus was not a man to be reasoned with, but this was not to credit their intellect. It was because they viewed Virus as an animal anyway. Not a man. All in all, they were just as dumb as the bleeding superheroes on the floor. However, they were, ten times as ignorant, and thrice less noble, and that made all the difference in Virus's mind.

There was no talking to Virus, there was no warning, only gunfire. Virus by now knew exactly how to dodge. He shot a blast of Kajiki at the leader of the redneck's gun to meld it shut, and then with five punches and three kicks he completely disarmed the four other rednecks. He then stood face to face with the redneck leader, a look of sheer hatred on his face. The redneck returned Virus's animosity in kind. But he was shaking, something Virus was not. Virus said, "You hate me, right?" he took steps towards the redneck leader who stood shaking holding his ground, "This is a war right?" Virus took the gun from the redneck's hands and smashed it against his face, drawing blood, "You hate us, don't you?" Virus hit the man again and again until the gun broke, drawing more and more blood, tearing up more and more flesh, which all formed in a puddle on the floor. "You hate me, don't you?" Virus yelled before stomping on the man before the former fell helplessly to the ground, "You want to kill me? You want to kill my people?" Virus stomped on the man many more times as he struggled to get away, there was no one to save the man now save for God and God was silent, "You don't even know me." Virus began to shake and knelt over to the redneck leader, bearing down on him with his fists. The redneck made unintelligible cries for help. Whimperings for mercy as Virus bludgeoned his face and his body, spouting blood everywhere. There would be none.

"What is it?" Virus asked with fury, "What is it you worthless prick? You rat bastard?" Virus continued to bear down on the man, "What is it? Is it that we're better than you?" Virus beat more furiously now, he had to remind himself he could not kill the man. He had to be sure not to kill him, but Virus had so much rage in Virus's soul. Virus began to breathe heavily, "Is it that you can't handle feeling inferior to us? You've got to take out your frustration at being bested by us? You can't handle being small? So you've got to go and fuck up everyone else? Is that it? You rat bastard. You fucking rat bastard." Virus beat the man until he stopped pleading. Then he got up from the floor and looked on at the terrified patrons. Virus looked down at the redneck leader and shuttered. Still alive. Barely. Virus secretly used some Igakuki on the man, just enough healing energy to hold him until he could get proper help. As Virus left the bar, people remarked with shock on his brutality. Virus merely muttered back at them, "I'm not a doctor." with scorn as he fled into the night. Virus spent several hours running. Running as fast as he could. Anywhere he could be to be away from the redneck leader. A bitter taste in his mouth. Virus drank the feeling away. He drank

until there was nothing left.

Then, at last, Virus was sufficiently intoxicated to feel comfortable returning to his hotel. Finally so numb he could rest. Virus decided that if that vaginal fuzz ball complained even the slightest bit about being awoken, Virus would take him outside the hotel and beat him into nothingness. Virus knew he was capable. To Virus's relief, Freak said nothing. Virus probably would not have even noticed if Freak had, for he was too numb to notice the bullet holes in their hotel room. The broken window, shards of glass, wood, and the television, and the burnt carpet which indicated a firefight. Virus slept, and by some miracle of God, he wound up sleeping on his belly.

Virus awoke mid afternoon the next day, and sprang up quickly when a voice said, "He's awake." Virus turned to see three men sitting on the bed Freak should have been occupying. It was now that Virus realized the hotel room had been trashed. Virus looked at the three men. They all wore the costumes of a superheroes. Each man's costume was crude and ragged. These heroes had no money to constantly stitch up their uniforms, and none to have costumes custom made. Virus made a mental note that one of the superheroes' costumes had a insect theme, with all the bug elements crudely removed. Virus looked around and the former bug superhero said to him, "Your friend is safe."

"Where is he?" Virus asked.

The former bug superhero sighed, "I wish we knew. Your friend made fast work of the villains and then fled. We did not get here in time, but we knew your friend was alone, so we had a hunch you would return. This is why we stood guard."

Virus breathed a sigh of relief, "Freak and I have a meeting place set up in case we are ever separated. It's happened before. Two men against an entire mob. Things like that happen. We created a plan in case that happens." Virus walked to the window and looked out at the pleasant blue sky. "So, the mob sent people to kill us." Virus asked with a big smile on his face.

"These people were not sent by the mob." the former bug superhero replied.

Virus turned to the three superheroes and asked, "Then who were they?"

The former bug superhero looked uncomfortable at the question and said, "The superheroes. Some of them government licensed."

"Why?" Virus asked in shock.

The former bug superhero sighed at Virus's glaring stupidity, "The Hexapods kept order. With no Hexapods, the crime rate has gone up dramatically. People are angry."

Virus paced back and forth, "But the Hexapods are a criminal organization. They deal drugs. They murder people. They support the gangs. They kill police. The corrupt superheroes. They control the city and diminish freedom. They sell human beings for Christ's sake. Why would anyone want that?"

The superhero next to the former bug superhero, a man in a faded orange and blue Lucha Libre mask spoke in a Mexican accent, "Octavian let them live their lives without thinking about any of that."

Virus stopped pacing, looked at the three superheroes, and asked, "Who are you?"

"Friends." the former bug superhero replied.

"Why are you here?" Virus asked.

The former bug superhero shrugged, "Somebody has to watch out for your stupid ass."

Virus scoffed, "I've never needed anyone to protect me. I especially don't need it now." Virus stared at the ceiling in deep thought and then looked back at the superheroes, "So, why help me? Why not help the mob? You guys don't want to not think?" There was anger in Virus's voice which made the third superhero, who had not yet spoken, uncomfortable.

"¿Qué ha dicho?" asked the third superhero to the one in the Lucha Libre mask.

"Preguntó por qué le estamos ayudando." replied the superhero in the Lucha Libre mask.

The third superhero looked disgusted, "Lo estamos ayudando porque Octavian vendido mi esposa e hijos como esclavos. Y usted se vieron obligados a cerrar debido a Octavian. Entonces Octavian trató de matarte." The third superhero's eyes shifted to the former bug superhero, "Y Octavian trató de matarlo cuando salió de la organización.."

Virus stood in silence for a while before asking, "What did he say?"

The superhero in the Lucha Libre mask paused before answering, "He said the truth. Whenever a big man walks around and says he'll remove the chaos from people's lives, he always throws that chaos onto

someone else. Those subject to this can never accept the way things are."

Virus's eyes showed understanding and there was a pause. The former bug superhero said, "We can help you."

"I don't want help." Virus replied.

"You are taking on the entire mob." replied the former bug superhero in protest.

Virus grimaced, "Yes I am. I'm taking on the entire mob. I wouldn't have to if you hadn't sold your souls to them so you wouldn't have to think. You didn't think then, and you won't think now." Virus walked to the opening which used to be the hotel room's door, turned around, and then said, "Don't follow me." before leaving.

Virus made his way to the meeting place. An old bus stop in the middle of nowhere. Nothing for a solid three miles in any direction save for the desert. Virus had no idea why anyone would make a bus stop here. It looked like it had not been used for years. Upon getting there, Virus found not only Freak, but a man sized hominid calico cat. A skinny man just a bit taller than Freak, yet shorter than Virus. Freak's eyes lit up upon seeing Virus and he exited the bus stop with the cat man to greet him.

"Did you go to a fuzz ball convention or something?" Virus asked.

Freak shook his head, "Nope. He found me."

"Wasn't hard." the cat man said, "The two of you leave a bloody mess wherever you go. I'd say by the description of the crazed bar fighter who kicked the asses of several superheroes and innocent humans that he was you as well, Virus. The two of you should really learn to keep a lower profile."

Freak spoke before Virus was able, "He wants to help us finish off the mob, Virus. He's a fan, and thinks what we are doing is commendable. Virus, meet Raziel Felis, Raziel, meet Virus."

Raziel extended his hand and Virus shook it. "Keeper of secrets?" Virus asked.

"What?" Raziel replied, confused.

"Keeper of secrets." Virus replied, "That's what Raziel is. The keeper of secrets. It's the name of an angel in Jewish mysticism."

Raziel winced, "I didn't know that. I just knew it was the name of an

angel. That's why I picked it, I didn't know he was the keeper of secrets."

"An angel's name." Virus started, "Do you come from the sky?"

Raziel pondered for a moment on how to reply, before saying, "Something like that."

Virus nodded, "Your DNA structure is very odd. I'd like to analyze it more closely some time."

Raziel raised his eyebrow, "How can you detect my DNA structure?"

Virus shrugged, "I control viruses. It's a package deal. They let me see people's DNA. Viruses can do all kinds of things."

Raziel nodded slowly, "Of course. I should have realized. You have the power to heal others. You must do it one cell at a time. Repairing each individual unit, one by one. A prerequisite of that would be the mere ability to scout out the cell with viruses, which would include the DNA." Virus nodded, and Raziel added, "That must be laborious."

"It was really hard the first time, and took me some time to figure out how to control." Virus replied as he shrugged.

"You had powers from birth, right?" Raziel asked. Virus nodded, and Raziel said, "Then you were mutated, and this is what gave you your virus powers. The rapid changes in your DNA must have made it easier to master your blooming abilities. And I'll bet it must have been painful." Virus made a gesture of indifference, and Raziel said, "You'd be a fascinating subject of study yourself."

Virus turned to Freak, and asked, "So, what have you done all day. You two been reading gothic poems to each other?"

Freak rolled his eyes, "I went to a coffee shop and looked over our evidence. At least the evidence those superheroes didn't wreck. Then I learned about an impending attack on the mayor. Octavian's getting desperate. He was going to kill the mayor brazenly to try and reestablish his control. I managed to foil the attack."

"I'll bet that was fun." Virus replied.

Freak shrugged, "Piece of cake. The Hexapods have been really sloppy since we took out Armaturian."

"He was, by all accounts, the brains of the operation." Raziel said, "I'm sure Octavian has been a little lost without him."

Virus smiled, "So, we killed the brain, and now the body is struggling for survival still. We've got them running."

Raziel looked disheartened by Virus's remarks, "My sources also tell me that Octavian was visited by a representative of the Pantheon early this morning. I think they're getting ready to drop him."

"Old fuck's getting to watch his whole empire fall before his eyes." Virus laughed, "Good."

Freak looked concerned, "It's leading him to act irrationally and erratically. That's dangerous."

"We can handle it." Virus replied.

"What if the city can't?" Freak asked.

Virus shrugged, "They've handled a tyrant for thirty six years."

"Some would argue that Octavian has been good for the city." Raziel said.

"Only for the people he wasn't dumping all the chaos onto." Virus replied.

Freak frowned, "We need to take Octavian out quickly, or else he could do something dangerous. He's desperate. We've boxed him in. There's no telling what he could do. He either wins or loses everything. In those circumstances, he is free to do anything. To us, to the city. Look at how bad Anathema was. If Octavian directs that pain outwards..." Freak's voice trailed off.

Virus looked at Raziel and spoke, "Look Kittens, I don't mean to be rude, but I can see you. You don't have all the markings of magic that Freak and I have. We use Namaki, Shibooki, Tengokuki, Oniki, all four forms. All nine elements. Life, Ice, Grass, Earth, Air, Lightning, Fire, Water, and Chaos. In all the forms they manifest as in the different types of chi. We can handle this without you. You would only get in the way."

Raziel smiled, "Fighting is not my specialty, I'm afraid." Virus looked at Freak, then to Raziel, and back at Freak again, then Raziel said, "I deal in information"

"He's going to help us find Octavian so we can go kill him." Freak said to Virus, "Raziel has more information than we were ever able to collect. If we had worked with him from the beginning, we might have destroyed this place in five days time."

Virus stared at Raziel, and asked, "Are you a superhero?"

Raziel sighed, "Sadly no."

"Then what are you doing with all your information?" Virus asked.

Raziel shrugged, "Giving it out to superheroes, what else?"

"He leaves it at superheroes bases anonymously at night." Freak explained.

"Great, we're working with Santa Claus." Virus replied. Freak and Raziel laughed.

"Come on, let's go back to my pad." Raziel said, "There I can give you guys all the information I have."

Raziel's domain was musty and dark, and it was packed full of shelves lined with books and folders with papers and photographs. There were also a fair number of filling cabinets, all loaded with files. Virus, Freak, and Raziel sat at a circular table towards the center of the room. The room's one decent light hung above them. Raziel had poured the three of them grape juice in coffee cups. The three men sat over several files looking down at them intently.

"Do you eat rats when they get down in here?" asked Virus of Raziel.

Raziel shook his head, "I'm a vegetarian, actually. When I find rats down here I tend to leave out a bit of food for them."

Virus looked disgusted, "You're a cat, and you don't eat rodents?" Raziel nodded, and Virus added, "What kind of cat doesn't like to eat rodents?"

Raziel shrugged, "Human beings are omnivorous by default. Meat factors into the standard diet for Homo Sapiens. And yet, in the modern era, enlightened individuals can find adequate substitutes for it. It's the same kind of thing. I prefer not to kill creatures which I know can feel pain."

"You'd make a poor superhero," Virus said, "Superheroes have to be willing to kill on a whim."

"You didn't kill anyone at that bar last night." Raziel replied, "I imagine that took effort."

"I said you have to be willing to kill." Virus replied, "Not that you should kill needlessly."

Raziel looked up from his papers at Virus, "So then, you are against killing?"

"No." Virus replied, "I just place such a high value on murder that I reserve it for special occasions."

Raziel nodded, "And you are perfectly willing to maim innocent victims, normal humans even, almost to the point of death?"

"I'm not a doctor." Virus replied.

Raziel looked back down at his paper, "People at the bar last night reported smelling incense as you left. The mark of Igakuki, the mark of a healing move. It seems you have at least some hidden compassion."

Virus continued to flip through the files he was looking at as he said, "If I had killed him, I would have to go to jail."

"Assault and battery is illegal, too." Raziel replied.

Virus looked up at Raziel, "They aren't going to chase me across the country for a simple assault. Not when all the people I beat up were brought back to full health with healing potion."

"Maybe even better health than what they started with." Freak said without looking up from his files.

Raziel nodded, "Yes, 'Most individuals have small ailments and maladies they neglect to treat. Therefore, when a combatant is revived with a potion, it is likely that they are being recovered to greater health than that with which they started.' Scipo's law." Virus looked back down at the files he was reviewing. Raziel leaned in closer to his papers and said, "Of course, we all know healing potions don't cure psychological wounds. Perhaps that is a lesson for you to learn."

"I know about the psychological effects of battle." said Virus, "That's something you sign up for in this business. If you let something get the best of you, you should just go somewhere and fucking die."

Raziel looked up at Virus and said, "Last night, when you started that bar fight, you were dressed as a racist."

Virus continued to look at his files, "Yes."

"Every time I've seen you on television, you've spoken of how hate

the Sons of Purity for their attempted genocide of humans during the World War, and you've generally railed on bigots." said Raziel.

Virus turned a page, and said, "Bigots disgust me."

"Then why would you dress as one?" asked Raziel.

Virus shifted around in his chair and said, "I like candy. I thought it I pretended it was Halloween people would give me some."

"Would you ever fuck a human woman?" Raziel asked as he returned to looking at his files, "Even though it might produce a superpower inept baby?"

Virus looked up from his files with contempt, "One out of eight babies born to two superhuman parents is born without powers. One out of fifteen babies born with one superhuman parent is born with powers. Which means that ninety three percent of babies with one superhuman parent is born with powers. The point is, it doesn't seem to matter if superhumans interbreed with humans. It won't produce inept dumb down babies." Virus looked at the floor, "The Sons of Purity used to kill people for having human babies. Thinking that they had sex with a regular human and that they were race traitors. In reality, it was just those one in eight babies born without powers."

"I know that." Raziel replied, "I was merely trying to ascertain whether or not you were aware of that fact."

Virus looked at Raziel, "Last night, I was just looking for a fight, that's all."

Raziel looked up at Virus, "So you picked on someone who has a massive handicap. That's highly noble of you."

"I never claimed to be noble." said Virus.

Raziel put his hands on the table and replied, "Just looking for fights. So, you aren't fighting all these mobs for the greater good?"

Virus swallowed, "I never said that. I just also never said I was noble."

"This is some impressive information you have, Raziel." Freak said as he lifted up his head from the files, "But I don't think any of this will help us find Octavian."

Raziel nodded, "I was afraid of that. Octavian keeps his whereabouts restricted to those closest to him. Still, I was hopeful that

something might have turned up. People have been leaving him in droves since they learned the Pantheon may drop him."

"No one wants to piss off the Pantheon." Freak replied.

"We do." Virus said in defiance.

"Oh, and don't forget about that Captain Carcharian." Raziel said, "Told the Pantheon that he didn't work for them anymore and that he did his tour of duty during the war, right? Said it right to Zeus's face, right?"

Freak nodded, "Yeah, and all Zeus did was to send him a bunch of 8-tracks of classical music and thank him for his service. Further telling him that he had gone well beyond the call of duty for the Pantheon. Carcharian did win a medal of honor in Vietnam."

"He sent Carcharian classical music?" asked Raziel.

Freak nodded, "Yeah, I've heard Captain Carcharian really digs classical music. He's also big into Marine Biology. Studies dolphins and shit. And sharks, of course."

"Odd tastes for a man who dropped out of school and is infamous for busting in the skulls of anything to ever cross him. Imperial Terrace's one man gang during the fifties." Raziel replied.

There was the sound of a bell ringing. Virus quickly rose to his feet, looked around and said to Raziel, "Are you expecting anyone?"

"Relax." Raziel replied as he slowly rose to his feet, "It's probably someone with a lead."

"You bring them here?" Virus asked in disbelief. Raziel nodded, and Virus said, "What are you going to do one day when a super villain gets tired of you feeding information to superheroes, comes down here, and kicks your scrawny ass?"

"Normally I have Willow to ensure I am not harmed." Replied Raziel.

"Willow?" Freak asked.

Raziel looked at Freak and said, "A friend of mine. He was rejected from a government superhero team, and he's badly mutated he can't get a job anywhere else, so I pay him a little money to protect my home." The bell rang once more, Raziel looked at Virus, "I've got to get this. You two stay here. I'll call if I require assistance." Raziel left the table and walked across the room to a rickety flight of old wooden stairs. Going up them, he exited the basement and went into a

antique store. Raziel reached into a secret compartment in the wall and retrieved a high quality laser pistol from it. Concealing the weapon in his attire, Raziel walked up to the door and opened it. A man in all black stood outside, looking nervous. "This store is closed." Raziel said in the best harsh sounding tone he could muster.

Raziel began to shut the door when the man in black said, "I've got information for you." Raziel smiled and the man looked around in fear.

"Come in" Raziel said. And then he let the man in. Raziel sat the mobster down by the register and asked, "What have you got for me?"

"I got the location of Octavian's base." said the mobster as he pulled a manila envelope out of his jacket and laid it on the register.

Raziel did not look at the envelope, instead, he looked straight into the mobster's eyes, "That's impressive information. How did you get it?"

"I uh, I work for Octavian. I used to work for him." the mobster replied while looking around the store.

Raziel continued to stare straight into the mobster's eyes, "Octavian keeps loyal men close to him. Why should I believe that this is real? What made you betray him?"

"Man, the Pantheon's dumped him." the mobster replied, "Shit, no one fucks with the Pantheon. That includes me. I'm not a fucking idiot. The Pantheon could take on every other big time syndicate with one hand tied behind it's back. Only reason they don't is that truce. I don't want nothing to do with waging war on the Pantheon. That's what Octavian is fixing to do."

Raziel considered this for a second and then said, "Alright, I believe you. You may go." The mobster stood up and walked outside. Raziel watched as the mobster looked around and then ran away from the store. Once content that the coast was clear, Raziel ventured back into his basement. He slammed the manila envelope down on the wooden table and smiled, "We've just got it, gentlemen. A guy just walked in and handed me Octavian's location."

Freak looked at the envelope with suspicion and began to take out it's contents and read them.

"Good." Virus said, "We can finish this tonight and then head out of town tomorrow." Virus glanced at Raziel and said, "I'm sorry I doubted you, Kittens." Raziel looked annoyed with Virus.

"There's something wrong about this." Freak said.

Virus forced a laugh, "Yeah, I know. I never thought a kitten would position us into our final strike either. Then again, you're practically a dog and the two of you seem to get along just fine."

"No." Freak said as he peered over the papers intently, "There's something wrong about this. Two weeks we've looked for Octavian's base and we got nothing. Then a guy just waltzes in here and gives us his whereabouts?"

"Octavian's empire is crumbling." replied Virus.

Freak shook his head, "Die hard followers skip along with their leader into ruin. The type of people Octavian would keep with him at this point would never betray him. This has to be a trap."

"So what if it is?" Virus asked.

Freak looked up from the papers at Virus and stood up, "If it is, we need to be careful. Let's postpone our attack on his base. Let's feel it out and let things happen for a few days."

"I've got extra rooms with beds up on the second floor." Raziel said, sounding happy to have guests.

Virus looked at Raziel and then at Freak, "No. We've been here two weeks. We could have been here two days if it weren't for your damned caution. I'm sick of it. You draw things out because you're a timid little pussy. We finish this tonight."

"It could be a trap, Virus." Freak replied, "This is tactical. We waited to attack Betularia so that we could bring down the superhero establishment with him. We let the fear set in and then we attacked Armaturian..."

"No." Virus cut Freak off, "Attacking Bhamoensis was a tactical move. We took out the biggest and the baddest first. That was tactically smart. Waiting to attack Betularia was just a waste of time. The superheroes would have fallen with the Hexapods anyway had we just taken out the whole organization. The only reason I even agreed to do it was to end your nonstop bitching about how it was a good thing to do. And so that I could drink, which meant less time driving on the highway with you, and less sob stories about this little fucking cult you were in that abandoned you because they correctly assumed that you were an evil fucking monster. Or about some crazy bitch you worked with so that she could study your powers because she was so interested in them. Or some self righteous goblin friend. Or how you

got rejected from every superhero group you applied to. You're fucking stupid to want to join one anyway. You're pathetic, and I don't want to hear your crybaby stories any longer. You make me want to vomit. I want to get this over with, we attack tonight."

Freak looked at Raziel and said, "He does this. He didn't really mean any of what he just said. He just feels the need to fight everything."

"I've noticed that." Raziel replied and then he turned to Virus, "I'm sorry for getting too personal with my questions earlier."

Virus looked at Freak and Raziel with pure malice in his eyes, "I meant every word of it. You hold me back."

"My talent scares you one minute and holds you back the next." Freak replied. Virus and Freak glared at one another, and then Freak said, "I really think this is a trap. We should be careful."

"What is he going to do to us?" Virus asked halfway laughing, "By all accounts Octavian is an incompetent jackass. We could take on legions of his men before we even broke a sweat. Whatever trap he sets we can just turn against him and kick his ass. There is no reason not to attack tonight. We can fight off whatever he throws at us."

"There are more ways to destroy a man than brute force." Freak warned Virus.

Virus shook his head, "There's no way he can destroy me. I'm attacking him tonight, with or without your help."

Freak sighed, "Well, I can't let you go and face him by yourself."

Virus smiled slightly and said, "Then I guess we're attacking tonight."

There was an awkward pause, broken by Raziel, "Well, I wish you both the best of luck. And if you're ever in town again, I'd love it if you visited. It gets lonely here."

Virus and Freak left shortly after Raziel extended his invitation. Sure enough, Virus complained to Freak about how nosy and intrusive Raziel had been. Freak could relate, he would not have liked it if someone probed his personality either. Then again, he did not much care for Virus spilling his secrets. This fact alone led Freak to tell Virus he did not care to lose the friend Raziel represented rather than chime in about how Raziel might have crossed a boundary by trying to size Virus up too quickly. The two argued so violently at the restaurant, patrons left, and the duo was asked to leave.

Virus refused to leave, and then complained about how bad the food was at the restaurant.

After some time arguing, the Virus and Freak sat in silence for a half an hour, refusing to even look at one another. And then at last they quickly made peace. It was not difficult for them, all they needed to do was talk magic. This time they spoke about the Ancient Egyptians, known for their strides in magical study. The Egyptians were accredited with the discovery of Shibooki, the chi of the undead. Given this fact, magicians would often channel dead spirits and demons in order to use it, granting magic a reputation as the art of witches and demons. Namaki, the first type of chi element, seems to have been invented shortly after fire. Tengokuki was discovered in the early 1600s, and Oniki in the early 1700s. Or likely rediscovered. There is evidence that they were used in ancient times, and that the knowledge of them was lost at some point. Freak and Virus debated intellectually about who might have actually invented them. They eventually settled on the Romans. A fifth type of magic chi, Jumyooki, lifespan chi, had been officially discovered in the mid eighteen hundreds. It was a form of magic without which a living creature could not survive, which somewhat confirmed the occult beliefs in a life force. It could not be used without killing one's self or another, so it's usage was generally frowned upon, even by most super villains. Of course, there were legends in ancient times of magicians stealing souls and killing others to use magic. A sign of a Jumyooki attack, there were as well, legends of magic only Tengokuki and Oniki could achieve. So in reality, there was no set date of discovery of the types magic. It was something that had been discovered, lost, and rediscovered many times over the course of human history, and the cycle would continue. There was even some evidence that the groups which had held the knowledge of these magics tried to suppress their rediscovery and the reemergence of their widespread use to gain an edge. The enlightened used the weapon of religion on the ignorant, of course, demonizing the the new magics as the work of the devil. The types of magic all had Japanese names because Japanese Magicians had discovered the magical elements first. The naming scheme was the name of an element in Japanese plus the suffix ki.

The patrons hardly even recognized Virus and Freak as the two warring enemies who entered the restaurant. Now they seemed as if they were two old professors of magic, quietly discussing their craft with one another. They spoke entire sentences interminable to others, filled with secrets of strange dark matter particles which worked magic. They quipped and made jokes, and they quietly debated the point with each other. All hostilities were eased by the time Virus and Freak got up to pay their bill. They even apologized to the other patrons for their earlier behavior. Off the two walked into the night hand in hand like brothers, making light of their earlier strife.

Forty five minutes later, they entered the parking lot of Octavian's hideout. An animal shelter. It was on the outskirts of town. Well beyond Sacred Oasis's boundaries, which only spanned a portion of the metropolitan area it was a part of. This area had only sparsely located houses owned by rich whites. All of them decadent and complacent. The animal shelter was surrounded by a fake forest, planted by the owners of the business for aesthetic reasons. Virus and Freak knew well what this actually meant. Virus made some quip about taking Freak to his home as they entered the parking lot, and the planted forest behind them made ominous noises as they walked.

The gunfire erupted and fell upon Virus and Freak, the gravity which brought the tiny lead fragments throttling towards them was utterly powerless to prevent them from dodging the bullets. Not a single shot landed on either Virus or Freak. There was a calm following the barrage of fire, after which men with insect themed armor and weapons charged Virus and Freak. The two were ready for it. Entirely ready for it. What time the two did not spend dodging the blows, they spent landing blows of their own. Each man they tapped dropped like bombs from an airplane. Virus and Freak knew that many of the men they attacked died, but they paused not to consider this fact. All they thought about was the battle. The vague targets their bodies were hitting with their magically enhanced minds and their magically enhanced muscles and bones striking with impossible force. Magic enabled a superhero to break the laws of physics whilst providing for very little collateral damage to the surrounding environment. For an experienced hero, at least. It took practice. One would first have to temper their body with the right sort of magic to survive the forces, and then temper their mind to protect the area around them. It was just that Virus and Freak made it look completely effortless.

Freak sliced six bodies with his blue sword, gliding on the air as he did so. Most superheroes preferred gliding on gravity if they could. Not Freak. Freak always used air. And he always controlled it so carefully and precisely that there was never any damage done the things he flew past. The only effect was that Freak could fly at high speed. Once Freak had reached the limits of his physical ability to prevent damage, he used Kontonki, chaos chi, to bend reality ever so slightly to reverse his impact on the environment. All superheroes needed to learn to do this as their powers reached such a level they could destroy the place they were at or their bodies.

Freak had known that the henchmen awaited them in the forest. So had Virus. The two had decided to deliberately allow the ambush to take place. If Freak had still been with the Order of Sisiutl, they probably would have utilized stealth and taken down the henchmen one by one, avoiding the ambush and the bloody mess it created. This was how Freak preferred to work. Quietly, stealthily, but Virus did not

work that way. Virus liked to show off what he was capable of. His primary strategy was the sheer shock of someone so powerful. Virus was capable of stealth and tactics, just as capable as Freak was. Freak had seen Virus use them, but that was reserved for special occasions. In a way, Virus did things sloppy so people would never find out that he could be organized and precise. Not until it was too late. Freak was learning to be a show off. He had never liked attention, but this was the way his new partner worked. For better or for worse, it was now the way Freak worked as well.

Freak battled eight henchmen at once. Their mechanized insect pincers batted against his blue sword. One advantage Freak's sword had, it could exist in multiple places at once. Freak's foes were caught completely off guard, their minds seeing the sword's movements as an optical illusion. Only this did it become after it had stricken them. The soul remembering what ripped it from it's body as it faded away. Freak thought of Arista. Virus was right. She would never care for him, not the way he cared for her. Arista had always been angry with Freak, and it was indeed true, she had been studying him. Freak was both attracted to and repulsed by Arista. Only his anger towards her had he showed. Freak turned her away from him. She deserved Frank Rowley over him. Arista was actually the reason Freak had left Flaxen Terrace. She had kept bragging to Freak about how great Frank Rowley was. She did it constantly, until Freak finally accepted Virus's offer and the two had departed for Cherubim Hamlet. She was also the reason that Freak had even bothered trying out for the superhero group in Flaxen Terrace. He had been traveling all over, but one day she got angry and reminded Freak that there was a superhero group in town. She had accused him of trying to run away from her. Which was nothing short of crazy. Freak supposed Arista was worried she would not be able to write her thesis if he was gone. Virus had told Freak that he was talented and that he did not need Arista. Martin had said something similar. Martin told Freak that he could do things the former could not even imagine. Which was why Martin was arguing that Freak no longer needed a mentor. Martin then implored on Freak not to protest his exile from the Order of Sisiutl. He also told Freak that one day the latter would be a great man, who would be a gifted leader and would change the world. Then Martin left. Freak did not follow. He did not protest his exile. He merely wandered the Earth as he still was, searching for his place.

Virus and Freak had defeated the remaining henchmen before Freak was able to finish his string of thoughts. They had not broken a sweat, which was good, the worst was yet to come. Freak used his Heiseiki to create a spherical shield around Virus and himself, then the two kicked in the door to the animal shelter. Bullets from the customized insect mech suits came flying at them. The shield halted the bullets before it turned back to ordinary air and the bullets fell to the ground. Once inside, the two men no longer needed a shield. Their

shift movements allowed no attacks from their foes. Virus flew using his gravity controlling Juuryokuki, unleashing a torrent of water with his Mizuki as he spun around the air. Taking his knife from his pocket, Virus stabbed and slashed at his foes, dropping them like flies. Once the entire animal shelter had been cleared of minions, Virus got a feeling of slight anxiety in his gut. He could tell from looking at Freak that Freak felt it as well. The two searched towards the back of the shelter until they found an office. Virus crept up to the door and opened it.

A swarm of wasps rushed out at him and suddenly they sprang to life, making an awful buzzing sound. Flooding out into the hallway like a raging river. Freak instinctively placed a barrier of air around himself with Heiseiki. Freak would have tried to do the same for Virus, except he could not see anything beyond his packet of air. Freak figured that Virus could handle the insects, and he was correct. Virus's body glowed as it conducted a large amount of electrical power via Virus's Inuzamaki. As the bugs neared Virus, the electricity reached out and smote them with it's mighty force. Virus's perimeter was larger than Freak's. As soon as Virus recovered from the surprise attack, he turned on the offensive. He unleashed a wave of righteous flames with his Jigokuki. The flames met and mingled with the fire sent forth by Freak's Kajiki. Once the fire had spread around the hall and killed the bugs, the two men let it fade into oblivion. Virus and Freak looked at each other and breathed in heavily. There was still no sign of Octavian. This worried them. The Hexapods had obviously known the two were on their way. What kind of trap had they gotten themselves into?

Virus and Freak walked the animal shelter searching for Hexapod members. Walking down the rows of cages, Virus and Freak noticed something they had not before. Human beings peering out at them. Grabbing the bars, and with the battle over, begging to be set free. Both men were disgusted, but Virus seemed even more so.

"And we wonder why they hate us..." Virus said.

Freak grimaced, "Superhumans do some terrible things to humans sometimes."

Virus shook his head, "No, superhumans don't do some terrible things to humans. Most superhumans lead normal lives. They don't know magic. They don't use their powers for combat. They aspire to be doctors and lawyers. It's just that people see only the ones that attack others, and we all take the blame."

"Should we let them out?" Freak asked.

"Not yet. We're not doctors." Virus said, "If they're dumb enough to

get trapped in here and enslaved, they're probably dumb enough to get in the middle of the battle and die. We'll free them after we take out Octavian."

Freak nodded. The two ignored the pleas of the imprisoned humans and continued to search the animal shelter. They found nothing. Nothing whatsoever. Not a trace of an enemy. No sign of allies. Nothing. Surely this could not have been all the trap consisted of. Octavian was sloppy, but not this sloppy. It unnerved Virus. Something deep inside him told him he was about to be dealt a devastating blow. Something inside him could not shake the suspicion of a coming sneak attack or trick. Freak found an empty cell and investigated it. Turning over a low quality bed, he found a concealed hatch leading down into the ground. Freak looked up at Virus, "They wanted us to find this." he said.

Virus nodded and said, "I know."

Freak opened the hatch and the two men stood over a narrow tunnel with a ladder leading into a dank basement. It was barely big enough for the both of them. They jumped down into the second level of the shelter. It was dimly lit, and as Virus and Freak looked around, they saw several large cages filled with dozens of people. They were all filthy and wore ragged clothes. As Freak examined one cage, a man within approached the bars and wrapped his hands around them.

"They'll be back soon." the man spoke, "They said they're going to kill all of us when they get back. You have to let us out."

Freak turned to Virus and looked him in the eyes. Virus nodded. Freak approached the bars and opened them with magic. Freak looked at the man and said, "Sure, we'll let you out." Then Freak put his arm on the man's shoulders. The man's deafening screams echoed throughout the animal shelter as Freak unleashed deadly Inuzamaki to electrocute him. Laser fire erupted shortly after. Knowing their ruse had been exposed, the prisoners drew their weapons and attacked Virus and Freak. The two sprang into action as the shots went past them. Freak releasing large bursts of plasma with his Hoshiki, and Virus unleashing deadly parasitic plants with his Kabiki. The prisoners from the other cages dropped their facade and joined in on the attack. Freak flew about the cage, levitating and zooming, unleashing tiny stars from his hands and throwing them at his adversaries. His onslaught turned them to atoms. Virus moved through the air, keeping pace with Freak, throwing small pink flowers at the counterfeit prisoners. The flowers would then sprout vines which would engulf and enemy and drain them of their vitality. The few times Virus was bored with this, he unleashed vines from his hands and drained his opponents without the use of his flowers.

Soon, the skirmish had ended, and Virus and Freak were the only ones standing. They searched the rest of the level for any signs of life, but found none. Virus wondered to himself about what had happened to all the real prisoners as they went. He thought of all the doctors this forsaken place would need. It was Virus who eventually found the entrance leading down to the next level of the animal shelter. Virus and Freak jumped down the passage once again and entered into a level much like the previous one. Again, they encountered large cages with dozens of human beings trapped within. Virus frowned and raised his hand to unleash a torrent of Mizuki water on the humans, but he was stopped by Freak's sword. It pressed up against Virus's body, restraining him. Virus looked at Freak, and Freak stared at the prisoners. Virus looked out of curiosity for what interested Freak and came to the realization that these prisoners were in a magically induced trance. They were staring blankly at Virus and Freak. They were real prisoners this time. Their calmness was designed to get Virus and Freak to kill them. Virus shook inside his skin.

Just as Freak lowered his sword, gunfire sounded and marching men in insect mechs rushed towards them. Freak was the first to move. Lifting his sword into the air, he hovered rapidly into the mass of insect henchmen. Freak's sword began to glow a bluish green as he drew nearer and nearer. It was glowing with the power of Juuryokuki, the force of gravity itself. Drawing in it's victims as Freak brought down his sword to slice them. Pieces of their flesh orbited the sword as Freak moved on before falling out of orbit and to the ground. Virus moved after Freak. Virus took note of Freak slashing through his enemies with his mighty sword and took the necessary steps to catch up. Virus could not, after all, allow Freak to beat him in the death count. Virus thrust his arm forward with an open palm and let loose his Kooriki. Shards of jagged ice flew forward and hit the henchmen all randomly throughout their bodies. Only a few henchmen dropped from the attack and the rest seemed happy to have bested a monster such as Virus. Until they discovered with horror that the blistering cold had broken their suits. The gun systems on all the mechs had been frozen solid. The only option was to advance on Virus and attack with their pincer swords. Which was something the henchmen hesitated to do. Virus had counted on that. He summoned up his Heiseiki and used wind currents to land the ice shards at specific locations on the bodies of the henchmen. Not a single man got up off the ground following his attack.

Virus and Freak had conquered another level of the complex. How much farther down would they have to go? Virus had no idea. It felt like they would have to go on forever. Constantly venturing below. Virus's insides sank. Freak pointed to the entrance to the fourth level, and the two jumped into it's domain. Once there, they were again met with a room which was much like the previous two, except now, they came face to face with sixteen bulky mechs. These mechs were not insect

themed. In fact, they were entirely unimaginatively crafted. What the mechs looked like, were mechs. They were orange and purple, with glowing orange eyes. They stood at seven feet tall with a large mounted gun on the fight arm. There were slits all up and down the mechs for bullets to come out. On the chest was an image of Mount Olympus surrounded by flames. These were the universally feared Prometheus mech suits of the Pantheon. The Hexapods were a local mob, spanning over one city. The Pantheon was the large syndicate of super villains which ruled over many of the city mobs, and over a large population of superhumans as if it were a legitimate nation. The small mobs were responsible for making their own brand of mechs. These generally matched the local super villain's theme. The Prometheus suits, however, were only used in warfare against the other major syndicates, and against those deemed a threat to the Pantheon.

"Shit." Virus murmured as he balled his fist. He had hoped not to face such a formidable foe so soon. Virus did know that day would come. After all, he and Freak were going to take on the Pantheon directly eventually, but not yet. Virus was not ready for it yet. On the other hand, he was proud in a sick way. To be feared by people so powerful. He hoped the doctors would come and resuscitate his sorry carcass.

Virus charged his fist with sheer power via Nikushimiki and advanced at one of the Prometheus suits. It was best to make a last stand. Just before Virus landed his blow, the Prometheus suit unleashed a chemical toxin in his face. Virus quickly cupped his face with his hands, thought of the twisted doctors to invent such a toxin, and fell to the ground. Despite the general immunity to poisons granted by his virus powers, the compound still stung. And Virus kept thinking over and over to himself, "Prometheus suits don't have chemical weapons capabilities." He had to pause and dodge the rising flame. As Virus moved, more flame came at him, and as he moved again, it brought the oxygen back into his brain. Having a clearer head, Virus corrected his previous statement, "Modern Prometheus suits don't have chemical weapons." What Virus was up against, was a sixties eras suit. The sort that the Pantheon employed in Vietnam.

The super villains got in on any war that they possibly could. Vietnam had been a major war, because the four biggest syndicates, the only four considered major powers at the time, fought there. It was almost like a sequel to the Syndicate Wars fought in the late forties and early fifties immediately after the World War. Almost. It was the same players, but the changes brought about by the conflict were not as massive. Virus looked over at Freak as he dodged the flames and chemicals. Freak was dodging bullets, too. Virus smiled. These suits were primitive indeed. The types deployed very early in the war. They did not even have laser weapons. The Krasnee Volk, the

syndicate the Pantheon had fought against, did not have mechs at the time. The mechs they did have, were far technologically inferior to the Prometheus suits. The Pantheon was leading mech development then as it still was to that day. That did not help them against the Krasnee Volk. The Krasnee Volk found ways to endure and outmaneuver the Prometheus suits, as would Virus.

Virus charged up the Nikushimiki in his hand once more and threw his punch. This time it connected, blowing the head clear off one of the Prometheus suits. Virus smoothly followed up with a series of three plant spikes through another Prometheus suit's exterior, through the man inside, and out the other end. The holes the spikes left oozed blood and purple poison as the suit fell to the ground. Virus was hit with flames from behind and caught fire. He was quick to unleash Samuiki to cool the flames and put himself out. Afterwards, Virus was hit in the head by the hard metallic fist of the Prometheus suit. He fell to the ground and his mouth oozed out blood. Then his face contorted to a look of hatred. Virus took out his knife and held it to the Prometheus suit which had stricken him. Virus envisioned the look the man in the suit must have had. The mocking laughter which must have been hidden underneath the helmet of that Prometheus suit. The laughter which was ended as the knife transformed itself into a two and a half foot blade with the help of Virus's Metaruki. Into the man's chest the blade went, and out in wide swipes through his entire torso. Before the other Prometheus suits registered what was going on, Virus mowed down another three of their comrades. Then Virus was slowed by the release of fumes and flames in his direction.

The two substances combined for a lethal mix, and Virus threw down his blade, drawing up a force field of plasma around him to keep away the blast. Once Virus lowered his shield, he looked out to see one of the Prometheus suits brandishing his makeshift sword. The Prometheus suit flew at Virus fumbling the blade with the precision of a twelve year old kid in a public park. Virus was angered by the disrespect the man had shown his weapon. Virus placed his left hand on the Prometheus suit's torso. Netsuki began to gather in the hand as Virus dodged the blows, generating intense heat. The Prometheus suit swung the blade as Virus continued to dodge, failing to notice it's melting chest piece. All the molten metal slowly gathered at Virus's hands and stayed there due to Virus commanding the force of gravity. After enough of the armor had been melted to expose skin, Virus withdrew his hand, taking the molten metal with it. Then, with his right hand, Virus placed a parasitic plant on the man's naked exposed gut. The man fell to the ground and writhed about in his suit. Virus enjoyed the sounds of struggle which lifted up into his ears. The other sound Virus heard was the sound of the remaining suit creeping up behind him. Virus turned to it and released a large wave of Sanseiki acid which dissolved it into nothingness. Virus then let his left hand hang low. Finally allowing the molten metal to ooze

into the ground.

Freak stood watching Virus in amusement. He had beaten his eight mech suits first. Primarily because Freak had known from the start that the suits were Prometheus VII suits, and knew exactly what they were capable of. Octavian had not gotten these from the Pantheon to deal with Virus and Freak. They would have given him the newest model, Prometheus XII suits. These, Octavian likely got on the black market for a little extra security. Virus turned to Freak and asked, "You weren't going to help me?"

Freak shrugged, "You told me last time that we split the enemies evenly between us." Freak still had a big smile on his face. The two men went to the entrance on the next level and passed through it. The first thing they noticed was a hospital smell. The area was well lit, white colored, and sterile. It had the look of a doctor's office or a hospital. Virus and Freak encountered some henchmen as they strolled the halls, but not many. They merely killed the men and dropped them to the ground. Their blood staining the twisted purity of the place. Virus and Freak came upon a small area which had ragged picture books, armchairs, and broken toys. Battered dolls, action figures in pieces, and toy trains scattered about the room. The wall was crudely painted with teddy bears. A signed baseball was tucked away under a small chair, worn with age. There was something about that room which made the two feel sick. They left it promptly. Traveling down the halls, they passed rooms with various x-ray machines. Then they entered into one of the hallway's rooms which had a closed door.

It was a small doctor's office. Complete with a metallic bench for the patient to sit on, a stool, and a desk with a chair for the doctor. Medical posters adorned the walls. Each displaying some facet of the body and listing the things which qualified it as physically perfect. Virus stared at the desk. Going through it's first drawer, Virus found pens, notepads, and notebooks. He also found a small notepad with tallies marked all over it. Virus closed that drawer and opened the second. He found a stethoscope, and various other instruments any doctor would have to need to determine a patient's health. Virus closed the second drawer and opened the third. In it was a little black book. Virus took it out and opened it. Inside, it had guidelines on how a person should look. A person should be physically attractive. A person should be physically fit and able to perform work. A person should have scored a certain amount of points on his test, and less than the threshold amount. The results of the test should have already been given to the doctor by the nurse. The doctor should then make his decision about a person. And then he should act accordingly. Virus turned the page. The doctor was to prod the victim with various instruments. The doctor was to hold up the stethoscope to the chest for twenty seconds and make notes. Be sure to frown slightly. The doctor was to take the blood pressure and then

be careful to appear as if he actually was reading the instrument. The doctor was too look slightly worried. Virus turned the page. And then another, and another. For pages all there was were lists of diseases the doctors could tell the victim they had. Along with the listed disease was a short description of it, the symptoms, and what could be done. The doctor was to tell a victim what could be done to treat the disease. Then the victim would be taken by the nurses to...

Virus stared at the book. It was deeply unsettling to him because doctors were good men. He swayed back and forth and had great trouble deciphering what it said. It was as though someone had written it in a language foreign to him. It was like a four dimensional object. Something which could not exist. Something his mind could not process. The very existence of the book tore at the fabric of Virus's reality. Suddenly, from the hallway, there was the horrific sound of babies crying. Virus and Freak stopped examining the room to find the source. It was a room with no windows. Following the sound, Virus and Freak came to a door. They carefully opened it, and giant ants rushed out of the room at them. The two unleashed Kajiki fire upon the ants as they came. They were relieved. Looking around as they poured out their fire, they noticed how much more lab-like this part of this level was than the other part. They should have known. It was only that they were just too blinded by the shock of it all. The two saw speakers inside the room. It must have been where the sound of crying babies came from.

It was a simple task to defeat the ants. Soon, they were all small pieces of nothing on the floor bound together with brownish green slop. Virus had been right. Every single trap Octavian had thrown at them had been brushed aside. Whatever they came up against, they ripped apart. Octavian was losing so far.

Assuming Octavian was the one pulling the strings. Virus looked at Freak and saw a tension in his eyes. Virus felt the tension too. There were just too many unanswered questions for them. The two walked around the laboratory and the hospital area. They saw small ants, bees, wasps, spiders, and scorpions, and the chemicals to alter them. They saw operating rooms. They saw rooms for the checkups. They saw x-ray machines and waiting rooms. But they never saw any other people. Slowly the two realized that there was a sixth level to the complex. And slowly they made their way to it's entrance. Something inside Virus told him to turn away. But he did not.

Virus and Freak jumped down onto the slate colored concrete floor and were surrounded on all sides by henchmen in insect mechs. Virus and Freak started to attack, but they were halted by ear piercing human screaming. Desperate human beings screaming and thrashing. Desperate human beings banging and pleading to be set free. Virus and Freak were in standing in a circle. Outside the circle was a larger circle,

separated from them by a thick layer of glass. In the outer circle were hundreds of slaves. It was well lit. The floor was white. Every single slave was beating on the glass, trying to get out. Some being stopped by an invisible force further out in the circle. Contained in squares. In one square space, the people were struggling even harder than the others to escape. Their bodies obscured by the gray gas. The gas which stayed only in that square space. The same invisible force keeping the slaves and the gas inside. The pleas of the slaves was audible only over large speakers hanging above the inner circle in the center.

"Attack us and they all die." came Octavian's voice from the center of the circle. Octavian wore the same business attire as before, but this time he also wore a heavy black overcoat over them. "Attack us and they die." Octavian repeated, and then gestured to a man in a lab coat sitting in a booth with buttons and levers. "There are too many of us." Octavian explained, "We'll kill them, all of them, do you understand? You'll never make it to the switch in time. Do you understand?"

"I understand." Virus said. There was a ferocity to his tone. Virus gritted his teeth and clenched his fists.

Octavian smiled, "Good." It was just now that Virus saw Octavian looked worn and crazed. Some of his businessman and valiant leader facade had been chiseled away. What was left was a gangster in a suit. A crazed thug. Octavian looked at Freak, and asked Virus, "You'll call off your dog?"

Virus did not move, and said, "I'm sure my partner will not do anything to endanger these people's lives."

"Good." Octavian replied, "Now drop your weapons." Virus threw his knife to the floor, and Freak threw his sword. One of the henchmen picked up Virus's knife, and another went for Freak's sword.

"I wouldn't touch that..." Freak said as the henchman grabbed it and got shocked with blue electricity. The henchman fell to the ground. "It does that automatically." Freak quickly said to Octavian. Octavian nodded.

"I see you gave your dog a gift." Octavian said to Virus, "He must lose his sword a lot." Octavian chuckled a little, but kept the crazed look in his eyes. The sword had actually been a parting gift to Freak from Martin. Freak had added the ability to be multiple places at once as well as the sword's defensive magic himself. Octavian gestured to the outer circle with pride, and said, "This is where we bring the defective merchandise. It was Bhamoensis that designed this place. It was his idea to have the condemned contained

in separate cells where they could still see each other. That way we could have some fun. Bhamoensis used to make them dance. The cell with the best dancers would get the reward of living the longest. He would even sort them into the cells, trying to put slaves with a certain advantage in one, slaves with a different advantage in another. Then we'd place bets on who would last the longest. We all enjoyed it. Even Anathema, until a week ago. When he began sobbing on and on about how many people he killed, and how he never wanted to be a superhuman. Little prick wasn't even man enough to own up to his own actions."

"You know," Octavian continued, "We tried letting them go. The ones we couldn't use. At first, we let them go. But then they turned us in. They reported us to AFTMOS. Doesn't that just prove human beings are vermin? We let them live. We released them, and they repaid us by turning us in. They tried to reward us by robbing us of our hard earned cash. Bastards. We tried memory wipes next. They didn't work. We either took too much or too little. So we had to kill the ones that had too much. They could never function in society, so we took them to the back of the pound. Where they used to kill the dogs. It was Bhamoensis's idea. And then later, he posed the motion that we should just kill all of them. He gave me the plans for a means of mass execution that was efficient. The messiest part was figuring out how to dispose of the bodies. It took a little practice, but we got it." Octavian sighed, "I miss those days. You know why? Because we were still young enough to make mistakes and get away with it. We had a little precious time to experiment. There was time to handle the little fucks like you. We built all of this. We brought prosperity back to this city. It was ruined during the World War. We made people happy again."

Octavian looked at the ground, "Do you know what I learned this week? All of that was a lie. The corporation never respected me. They think they made me. They think I'm a joke. They think my powers are worthless. Worse, my own people, the people whose mouths I feed, don't respect me. As soon as the Pantheon mentioned dropping me, they all betrayed me. They stole from me. The mayor turned his back to me. The mayor. Without me, he would be a garbage man. Believe me. I made him. But your little dog kept my men from killing him. I have nothing left. All I worked for. Everything I built, gone. Taken away from me by two kids. Two little fucking rat bastards who can't bother to learn the proper rules of combat. You worthless little fucks. I'll bet you never imagined this could be a trap. You thought you were smart, huh? Well, you're not, you're stupid. You played right into my hands." Octavian looked up at Virus, "You're lucky, you know. I could kill you right now. With my own two bare hands. With one hand. I could smash the head of one of you and the other at the same time. I could do it before I could even blink. But the Pantheon wants you alive. You're lucky. I can't kill you. I want to kill you. I want to

feel your warm blood on my skin. I want to read my newspaper to a recording of your screaming. You're so lucky the Pantheon won't have it." Octavian laughed, "The Gods. The Gods decided I'm not good anymore, you see? It's amusing, isn't it, Virus? How our lives change. How they tread down paths we would not expect. Thirty five years I've been on good terms with Zeus. A first name basis. We went to ball games. And now I discover it's just because I'm good enough but I'm not good enough. A middle manager. That's all. I just bring in the profits here. Meaningless. No one respects me. My life has meant nothing. I mean nothing. I'm a joke. All of this is a joke." Octavian laughed a little as he took a step towards Virus and looked into his eyes with an expression of madness, "Have you ever needed to believe a lie just to preserve your own sanity?" Octavian rocked back and forth, "Have you ever had that lie taken away from you? Ripped from your hands? Have you ever been left to see the world without the protection of your own propaganda gone?"

"I've noticed something, in interviews you give, Virus." said Octavian, "When you talk about your reasons for doing this. I've been looking. Because I want to know your reasons. I want to know why you're doing this. I want to know why you've done this to me. I've noticed, you always mention two things. The World War. You talk about the World War as if the Gods themselves put the guns in the soldiers hands and marched them to fight the Sons of Purity. Then, you always mention your father as inspiration. Why not? He was a doctor, right? A good man. A great man. A man of compassion." Octavian pulled a dog tag out of his pocket and showed it to Virus, "A war hero." Virus searched his pockets for the Etherist's, his father's dog tag. And it was at that moment he realized he no longer had it. Virus tried to step forward before restraining himself. Octavian smiled, "That's right. You don't have the guts to kill all of these people." Octavian held up the dog tag and said, "The Etherist, Dr. Etherist as they called him after the war when he got his degree. Dr. Etherist. What a name. Doctor, a man who studies science, the body, facts. The Etherist. Ether, those forces unseen to us. What a contradiction. That name. Dr. Etherist. What a contradiction. Only a pathological liar could conjure such a name. A pathological liar." Octavian played with the dog tag and then looked directly at Virus, "You know something about lies, don't you, Virus? And so did your father. So did your father. Didn't he, Virus?"

Virus moved back and forth slightly, having the intense urge to take back his birthright, but he did nothing for fear of killing the prisoners. Octavian played with the dog tag and said, "You know Virus, I fought in that war, too. I was a hero. God must have put the gun in my hand too. Taught me how to fight for the first time. I got all kinds of metals. I got to sit with the leaders, the men running that war. I was a greater hero than your father was. In fact, that's how this all started. My group, the Hexapods. It was my special unit

in the World War. They sent us here. There were Sons of Purity sympathizers left in this area after the war. We came to clear them out. Whatever you think you know about that war, and the reasons why it was fought, you know nothing. It's all lies. We were sent here by your leaders. The ones you think today's leaders can't stand up to. They created all of this. This horrendous mess. The way our world is. The thing you're mad at. They screwed us. We saw what the Sons of Purity members were doing here. Selling human beings. We saw how much profit it would reap, and we got in on it. Why wouldn't we? We were entitled to follow our dreams. We were entitled to that. Who were they to say no? Who were they to judge? The humans are animals. They deserve to be bought and sold like animals. The Pantheon, say what you will about them, I'm not happy with them right now, but they gave us our cut. They were fair. The so called superheroes, the good guys, they didn't give us our cut. They wanted to fuck us, they wanted to enslave us, and they did. They enslaved you and all your brainwashed brethren. You live in a cage. We all live in a cage. So we, the syndicates, decided not to cooperate. We won that damn war. We were the ones who had to die for them. You think we destroyed any chance of real peace? Wrong. Without us there would have been no peace. We were entitled to take from them what was ours."

"What do you think your father thought of it all, Virus? I don't mean in public. I mean in closed doors. Behind walls. What do you think your father really thought? Do you know? Do you have his journal? A letter he wrote to one of your uncles? To your mother?" asked Octavian, "He would have a unique perspective on it, wouldn't he? After all, his father, your grandfather, well, he hated those human bastards. Didn't he? After all, he was a member of the Sons of Purity. A card carrying member. Successful, too. I understand your grandfather owned a three story house. He killed thousands of humans, condemned an untold number of others to death. He even brought his wife and kids to the openings of concentration camps." Virus looked down at the ground with disgust and shame, Octavian went on, "He had it made. Until he fucked it all up. Until he fucked around with a human woman. One we'll never know. Until he cheated on your grandmother and created that bastard child offspring, your uncle. Then they had to run and hide. And then your grandfather lost everything he worked for. He was a disgrace. I can't imagine why your grandmother never left him. Disgusting old fuck. Having sex with a human. It's practically bestiality."

Octavian paused and waited for Virus to look up before saying, "Do you think when he sent his sons into battle years later, do you think it was because they all suddenly changed their minds about humans? Or was it vengeance? Of course, the one child was too retarded to fight. Not even fit for a human's standards. Fucking little retard. I'd have killed him. Do you think it was really ideological for them? Do you think your grandfather allowed all of his boys but one to die for the

Allies because he agreed with their views? Maybe he regretted it. We both know eventually he killed himself over it. Sank deep into depression. I'll bet he regretted ever sticking his dick into that human bitch. I'd have killed her for seducing me. I'd have fucking shot her and killed the kid, too. I'd have fucking shot her while she was pregnant. Do you think if your grandfather never had that baby, do you think if your uncle wasn't born, do you think that your father would have gone down the path he did? Do you think so? Do you think your father was really that noble? Do you honestly think he wouldn't have been performing experiments on humans? Do you think he wouldn't be examining people to see if they had powers? To see if they were fit to survive? To condemn them to death by fumes? Is that what you think?" Octavian glared at Virus with madness.

Virus looked away from Octavian's eyes. "There were a lot of us who didn't believe in that bullshit. A lot of us hated the humans just the same as the Sons of Purity. The concentration camps never bothered me. A lot of us preferred sterility, or letting them die out, or hanging them on trees, but we agreed with the general concept. War is the art of deception. The leaders just needed to create a lie to get people to die for them." Octavian said, "It wasn't that we were good and they were evil. It was that we didn't want to live under their rule. It wasn't about freedom. They were taking something that belonged to us. They didn't have a right to have it. No. They didn't. It was ours." Octavian shook his head, "Everything you know about that war is a lie. Everything you think you know. You've built up this big mythology around that era of time. Take the story of Kenny Strauss. Everyone knows the story of Kenny Strauss. The superhero who volunteered to be injected with a serum to make him super strong so he could kill the mighty Emperor Heru. Even though he knew it would kill him. Kenny Strauss, the man who brought down Emperor Heru, Lord Heka, and Lord Bomani, the three leaders of the Sons of Purity."

"Do you want to know what actually happened to him?" asked Octavian, "That serum did kill him. But not right away. It took two long years. Two long years of pain and misery. Two years of his body falling apart. The leaders hid him away and told the world the serum killed him right away. They gave him substandard medical care. You think we did to people in Vietnam was bad? He wasted away in a dark room with an uncomfortable bed for the last two years of his life. Kenny pleaded with them to see his family again, but they denied him that right. His family was fed the same bullshit as the rest of the world. He spent all that time, dying and wasting away, crying about how much he regretted taking that serum. He watched as the postwar dream came apart. As the syndicates battled. That's what bastards those leaders were. They could lie to the entire world, but they couldn't even lie to Strauss to spare him some pain. They were sadistic bastards. They knew exactly what that serum would do to Strauss, they did it anyway.

Jed Avenger merely injected it into his arm stoically. They knew. They told Strauss they thought it might kill him. They knew damn well that it would kill him. That it would waste him away. Avenger gave them a detailed report on the effects. They hail Strauss was an everyman who rose to the occasion to do something exceptional. Wrong. Strauss was a nineteen years old from Nebraska. He was brave and he was strong and he was stupid and he was naive. He had golden hair and crystalline blue eyes. He was a patriot who wanted to serve his country. He was willing to die for it. He was willing to die for what he believed in. And he thought his leaders had his back. But in reality, they offered him to their satanic human god as a sacrifice on their pagan alter. He believed them because they shook his hand, smiled at him, gave him false thanks, and let him smoke an expensive cigar. That's all they needed to do to buy his loyalty. You didn't see any of them giving their lives, did you? You didn't see any of them sending their children to die. No, they took someone else's child. To die for their power. A superhuman child. The serum would have worked just as well on a human."

Octavian dropped the Etherist's dog tag and said, "That's what that war was about. Not a righteous battle between good and evil. It was that. Right there. Kenny Strauss. Kenny Strauss was what that war was about. It was a trick. The humans tricked us into saving their pathetic asses. They made us die for them. They made us do their work for them. The bastards. And then, they sold us this peace. This fake peace, but they underhandedly fucked us. They fucked us. They want to enslave us. So we turned around and took what we were entitled to. It was their fault. What they did to Strauss was a war crime. If a leader did it today, we'd hang them. Why give the leaders of the past a pass? What was Jed Avenger's most prominent post war invention? The AFTMOS stick. The weapon for keeping superhumans under control. They don't use it on gangsters, they use it on peaceful protesters. College students and hippies. It's all a damn lie. You've been fooled. You bought the bullshit even your fucked up father couldn't handle. He left the superheroes after the war eventually."

Octavian paced and said in a lower tone, "Your father. Doctor and freelance superhero. Must have been hell for your mother. And then, one day he got this idea. A few years prior, a small fringe group called the Seed of Purity had created a virus." Virus shuttered, and Octavian continued, "A virus designed to kill the humans and only the humans. It was killing tens of thousands of humans every year. And your father, he wanted to cure that virus. So, he took you, months old, and your mother, and he ventured on to Europe." Virus's breathing increased as Octavian continued, "Tell me Virus, do you think your father left his laboratory to tend to you at night? Or do you think he left that to your mother? Do you think he even noticed you? His infant son?" Virus closed his eyes and opened them again, Octavian went on, "And then, oh, my favorite part of the story. All

three of you were infected by this virus. I wonder what kind of conversation he had with your mother. Explaining that he had gotten all of you killed. Explained that he had gotten her infant child killed. Then he worked on his laboratory more furiously than ever searching for the cure. He tried all sorts of serums. Your mother died. On the last night of his life, he injected you with the one. The substance which granted you your virus abilities and that enabled you survive. Do you think it was nobility that made him do that. Was it that he loved you and your mother? He wanted you to live in a world free of fear? Or was it that he was just a punk ass motherfucker taking on an entire mob for glory? Because he had something to prove." Virus's hands began to shake.

Octavian stepped on the Etherist's dog tag as he paced, "It's too bad he couldn't save himself and your mother, isn't it? So you had to go live with your handicapped, power deficient uncle." Octavian continued to pace, and Virus swallowed, his throat was dry and sore, "But it's ok, isn't it? The story has a happy ending, didn't it? Because little Virus avenged daddy. He finished his father's work. How old were you? Six? A hero. You used your powers to eradicate the virus. The one the Seed of Purity created. You healed thousands of people. Everyone knows the story." Octavian stopped pacing, turned to Virus, stepped forward, and looked into his eyes, "I read a magazine article once. An interview with your uncle. They asked him what he thought of your then months long crusade. Do you know what he said?" Virus looked uncomfortable, and Octavian smiled, "He said that he didn't even know you were gone. He didn't know that you had left home, and he told the reporters he would punish you for it. He didn't even realize it was a good thing. It must have been hell growing up with that mentally retarded prick, huh?" Virus got a bitter taste in his mouth and looked angry, Octavian went on, "For a long time, your story was all over the news, on the radio, in newspapers, in magazines. You know what I always found most interesting about those stories? The pictures. Old guy like me, grew up with black and white photos. So the vivid color photos of the sixties magazines, they were stunning to me. Do you know what I noticed? The scars on your arms." Virus looked down at the scars on his arms as they began to tingle.

"Wounds created by those superhuman prods they invented after the war." Octavian said, "You can get them for the price of a six pack of beer now, but those used to be really expensive. Too expensive for a fringe group of radicals like the Seed of Purity." Virus closed his eyes as the scars on his hands began to hurt and the memories ran through his mind. Octavian took a step closer to Virus, "It must have been so hard for your uncle. The youngest child, and a retard. No powers, not much brains. The son of a great man. A man asked for advice by the leaders of entire armies. The brother of soldiers. Heroes. Your father and the rest of your uncles did gain some recognition for their heroism in battle. It must have been hard for

your uncle. Having his superhuman brothers being so much better than him. He must have felt so inferior growing up. A mere mortal with brothers who could fly and perform magic. He tried to learn it, you know. Magic. He tried to learn how to do it. He couldn't. He was so small, and his brothers, they were so big. But you weren't big, were you Virus?"

Virus stepped back, and all the imprisoned humans looked at him with anxiety. He looked like he was about to snap. Octavian stepped forward, failing to notice what was so obvious to everyone else and said, "You were small, weren't you, Virus?" Virus's hands turned to fists, and Virus took a step towards Octavian, looking at him with hatred. Some of the prisoners actually audibly begged Virus not to do it. Octavian wagered that Virus would not. He moved forward and said, "It must have been the best day of your uncle's entire life. When he suddenly had an outlet for a lifetime of frustration. Didn't he?" Virus's face shook from the tension the adrenaline muscles underneath, the prisoners began loudly banging on the glass, Octavian went on, "It must have made him feel better for the fact he would have been on the streets without his brother's inheritance, or the money your father gave him." Virus's arms burned with the pain of the prod. In Octavian's face, Virus saw his uncle with his taunting remarks. Virus was being punished for flying up to the top of a tree. The prod boring into his skin. It stung like nothing else in all the world stung. Virus stumbled closer to Octavian, his eyes intense and unfocused. The banging of the prisoners grew louder and more desperate. Freak's body filled with adrenaline as he prepared to act and prayed it would be unnecessary. Octavian moved in closer to Virus, he was smiling sadistically as he said, "Do you think he would have even needed to do it if your father hadn't injected you with that serum? Would he have abused you? Did you originally have powers? Do you think you did? You're a mutt after all, because your father didn't learn the lesson from your grandfather and your mother was a human whore..."

Octavian was stopped by the sound of Virus's hand slowly crushing his windpipe. There was the sound of gas. There was the sound of screaming. Of praying. Of banging. Of gunshots. There was death and carnage. A green flash and green fog. More screams. The sound of the metallic booth with all its levers and buttons breaking. More death. More carnage. Carnage, chaos, and death surrounded Virus and Octavian. Virus was unaware of any of it. For Virus, there was only him and his uncle. Battling it out as Virus always wished to do. Every single night, every day, every hour of his miserable childhood. Virus's uncle's face was molded by Virus's hands into a pulpy nothing. His entire body demolished by Virus's fists. His uncle was a weak man, a small man, a miserable man, there was no fight. The man's illusions of power and authority flew apart with his body. Virus kept attacking long after Octavian was dead. He destroyed it until he

could be sure it could no longer harm him. Then Virus saw his father's dog tag, covered in blood. Virus grabbed it and held it in his hands. It was the only thing he had ever had of his father. Virus's uncle sold everything else. If the dog tag was worth money, he might have sold it, too. Virus held it close to his heart, looked down at Octavian, and then rocked back and forth.

Freak's eyes turned back to yellow from the glowing shade of green they had transformed into as his nose, ears, and mouth gushed out blood and he fell to the ground. Freak's entire body throbbed with pure aching pain. Freak coughed as he tried to breathe and took in only nauseous green gas. Freak hated to use his powers. They were difficult to control, and they hurt. Freak heard the sound of screams. Turning to a victim, he saw one of Octavian's henchmen whose head was fused to the floor, and his body lying down next to him, flailing. Freak stood up. The man at the control switch had an octopus coming out of his upper torso and head. Against it he struggled needlessly, the octopus was fused irreversibly to his flesh. Freak knew the man would not survive. Looking around, he saw Octavian's henchmen in various states of death and near death. Looking to the glass cells, Freak saw that some were filled with the gray gas of death, others were clear, and others had his green vapor. In those cells, there were some shocked looking people, others not put together quite right, and some fused to various objects. Some prisoners were fused to each other and screaming loudly. There was one man encased in one of the walls of one of the glass cells, trying to make his escape. Freak had tried, and that was all he hope for. He felt sick inside. Then he looked to Virus, sitting on his knees holding the Etherist's dog tag, over what must have been the body of Octavian. Virus was rocking back and forth, making meek, interminable noises.

"I think I was able to save must of them" Freak said, "But we lost some. I'm sorry, Virus, I wasn't fast enough. I wasn't skilled enough. I couldn't save them all, but," Freak's light voice cracked as he spoke, "I tried."

"You would try, wouldn't you? You bleeding heart pussy." said Virus without looking up, "The saddest thing is, you're too god damn stupid to realize they don't give a fuck about you. I don't give a fuck about them. Let them die. It's just collateral. I don't care. I attacked Octavian because I don't care. I'm not, I'm not going to let him get the best of me. I'm not letting anyone get the best of me. I don't care. It's just collateral damage. They have to die so that the world can be free. They're idiots. God damn idiots. They did this to themselves."

Freak looked down at Virus was sympathy. He slowly walked over to Virus and said, "Virus, I don't think Octavian was completely right.

I think that his hatred of humans was blinding him. Yes, the humans probably did screw over the superhumans, but we, we didn't try and make the peace did we? We never asked them why. We never talked to them. We just split into our syndicates and started fighting. We never gave peace a chance." Freak paused, "Can you blame them? After centuries of oppression and war crimes launched by both at the other, what else were they supposed to do? They couldn't just put that down. Two sides can't reach true peace without a painful coming to consciousness. Maybe one day we can do it, but...there will always be some setbacks." Freak looked up at the ceiling. The green vapor had begun to dissipate, and the surviving prisoners had settled down. Freak looked back down at Virus and said, "Virus, I don't know about your father. I mean, I never met the guy, but I think, I think he would have been proud of you. I think if he had lived long enough. If he had gotten to know you, he would have been proud. Why wouldn't he be? You saved tens of thousands of lives. Who wouldn't be proud of that?" Freak paused, "And he, remember, he left the superheroes because they made a deal with the syndicates. He set aside every soldier's dream of peace and security because he wanted to work towards a world with a real peace. He took care of your worthless uncle, unconditionally. He was a doctor. He healed the sick and comforted the dying. Even if everything Octavian just said is true, you still have all of that to prove your father at least had some decency. I can't be sure, but I think, I think your parents would be proud of you."

Unseen to Freak, Virus smiled. He clutched his father's dog tag with his hand and stood up, making a point to face away from Freak. Virus placed the Etherist's dog tag around his neck and said, "I guess we'll never know, will we? They're both long dead. We could never ask them. We'll never know if they would be proud of me, or what kind of people they were. It's all speculation and inkblots."

Freak searched for something he could say that Virus would understand and appreciate, and he settled on, "Well, I guess you can rest easy knowing that you can ask your parents when you get to hell. Or not. Hell is, after all, a lonely place. Once there, you're all alone."

Virus turned to Freak and said, "It isn't that there aren't other people in hell. It's just that everyone's been tortured so raw it hurts to make contact."

Virus and Freak shared an awkward silence before Freak turned away from Virus and said, "Uh...if you want go to a bar...I'd uh, I'd be willing to have a drink with you."

"I'm not a big fan of alcohol." Virus replied. Freak turned to him in surprise. Virus said, "Let's go back to the hotel, listen to some music, sulk, and plan our next move. Trust me, by the time we take on

our next mob, all this angst will be gone.”

It took some time to sort out the mess they made. Several hours they stayed in the shelter, talking to AFTMOS. Virus and Freak gave their accounts of what happened. Virus was sure to make it a humorous, exaggerated tale, and Freak gave awkward answers to inquiries about his powers. About a third of the prisoners died. Virus and Freak did not ask for a specific number. After all the work was done, the two returned to their hotel. Looking outside, they spotted a man wearing an overcoat and a hat. They both thought the man to be Octavian, somehow revived. It had been a long two weeks. Virus and Freak had not gotten much sleep, and their minds were fuzzy. Which is why, perhaps, there was no listening to a tape as Virus suggested. There was also no talk of the next attack. Only a brief magical discussion followed by sleep. Sleep which was peaceful, dreamless, and long. The next afternoon, the two awoke and packed themselves into Virus's car. They stopped by a drive thru and got some burgers and fries for the long drive. The next journey would take the two to Bovine Pasture. The two perked up as they talked about their next move. There was no need to talk about shared trauma buried deep inside. They drove on, cheerful and excited for their next great adventure.

End

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